

Chapter One: Death

Midnight. An overcast sky and the smell of moisture lingering in the night air heralded the arrival of a storm, which promised to be both loud and destructive. It was strange really, how nature worked. What had been a quiet night thus far, interrupted occasionally by the caws of crows, would soon give way to a powerful rainstorm.

In the living room of a small cottage at the magical village of Godric's Hollow, an auburn-haired, green-eyes young woman in her early twenties was waddling after a toddler. "Harry dear, stop. You shouldn't play with Daddy's wand, Harry..." Said toddler in question was gurgling happily and crawling around the carpeted floor of the living room, a wooden wand emitting small sparks grasped tightly in one hand.

A small chuckle came from a man sprawled over the cushions on the couch. With his messy black hair, wire-rimmed glasses and lazy pose, James Potter did not in fact resemble the powerful Auror that he was. Indeed, he looked like any normal family man, enjoying time with his family, laughing at said family's antics. "James Potter!" The woman, his wife of three years, yelled in an uncharacteristically shrill voice. "How could you leave a pregnant woman to do all the work? Come here this instance or you'll be sleeping on the couch till little Martin is born!"

When crossed, Lily Evans Potter could be quite formidable indeed. James' eyes widened in consternation as he gaped, "Two months? Mercy, Lils! I'm coming, I'm coming." He raised his hand in mock surrender.

As he moved to get up from the couch however, a loud warble soon filled the entire house with its noise. Dread filled James Potter as his brain deciphered the alarm, which had been set to go off if anyone not on the Potters' guest list appeared within the grounds of their house. It was a sound which James had prayed never to hear in his entire life. When his brain had finally caught up with the fact that the most evil man and/or his followers was coming for his family, James' protective instincts arose and he shouted, "Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off..."

Even as Lily scooped up the baby and ran upstairs, the heavily warded wooden door to their cottage exploded into shards. A tall

man clad in black, with a bald head, serpentine features and blood-red eyes entered the room. James shivered as his presence filled and chilled the room, as his suffocating aura flared out oppressively.

"Hold me off?" Voldemort's laugh was high and chilly. "Do you think you are capable of that, fool?" Gryffindor bravery coming into play, James Potter somehow found a well of courage in him to enable him snarl, "Of course!" He reached for his wand, ready to aim a curse at the dark lord, when suddenly, he realized that he had no wand. In the ensuing panic heralding the dark lord's arrival, he had not retrieved his wand from his son's grasp before Lily had carried him upstairs.

Voldemort's snake-like features were of absolute disdain as he sneered, "Worthless fool. Fighting without a wand? Stupid, stupid boy." Deeming the man unworthy of spending too much time on, with a flick of his wand, he sent James Potter flying out of the way, crashing against the wall before falling to the ground unconscious. "I'll deal with you later..."

Ignoring the unconscious Auror, Voldemort glided up the stairs to confront the woman, intent on his target. Cackling slightly in anticipation, he blasted open the lightly warded door of the room with a negligent flick of his wand.

Lily watched with fear and dread in her stomach as the nursery room's door was blasted open. Before the dark lord's entrance, she had raised her wand, determined not to go down without a fight, however, his very presence sapped her of all her formidable courage. Fear, thick enough to suffocate, drown, and bury one alive, stripped her of the will to fight. Fear, not for her own safety, but for that of her precious baby boy, Harry, and, to a lesser extent, the son inside her womb that she had never met.

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!" Lily cried out. She would throw away her pride if she had to, she would beg, anything, anything at all, as long as this monster would spare her precious baby boy. The love of a mother for her child is strong indeed, and Lily Evans Potter would prove that tonight.

"Stand aside you silly girl ... stand aside now." Voldemort all but hissed at Lily, idly toying with his wand. Even through her fear, Lily could not help but feel a brief flash of amazement - was the most

evil and sadistic Dark Lord of the ages actually giving her a chance to live? Yet Lily never once thought of accepting, not when she knew that the dark lord's target was her baby, her most beloved son. Even if she had the life of another son inside her womb, somehow, somewhat, it was different, this overwhelming love she felt for her Harry surpassed that that she felt for her unborn son whom she had never seen before. Given a choice like that, even if she could have saved little Martin...

Martin, please forgive me..."Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead..." Lily was desperate now, all but throwing herself between the dark lord and her son's crib, sobbing, pleading, begging. Anything, anything at all, to get the monster to spare her son.

"Move aside, girl!" Voldemort all but snarled at the woman, annoying little Mudblood that she was, in front of him. Even as the woman begun to tremble, she shook her head frantically. Voldemort was beginning to get annoyed. Very well, if the woman wouldn't move, he would just have to get rid of her. After all, he had indeed given her the chance to step aside, which, Mudblood idiot that she was, she wouldn't take...

He raised his wand, aiming it in her direction. Heedless of her subsequent cries, which was only increasing in volume – "Not Harry! Please ... have mercy ... have mercy..." – a flash of purple light shot out from his wand and the woman slowly suffocated to death. "Pathetic," Voldemort sneered. At least he would not have to listen to her irritating whines any longer.

He turned his attention to the small child lying in the crib, who was looking up at him with wide green, emerald eyes the colour of the killing curse. The child had been strangely quiescent throughout the entire confrontation, not even emitting a single squeak when his mother had fell to the floor. Stupid child...Voldemort thought with sardonic amusement. It did not even know that it's end was approaching. This was the child prophesized to have the power to vanquish him? This little thing did not look like it could vanquish anyone at the moment.

"Avada Kedavra!" Voldemort aimed the killing curse at the child just before the mother took her last breath on the floor beside the crib. Expecting the child to die in a flash of green light, Voldemort never in a million years would have expected what he saw. The killing

curse reached the child, then most of it rebounded off some kind of weak shield. While the remaining components of the killing curse was absorbed by said shield, the weakened form headed straight at Voldemort, who was not in time to dodge it, but was just in time to activate the darkest of his protection runes.

Pain, absolute agony filled Voldemort as he felt his soul fracture into many tiny bits, as it tried to leave his body. Luckily for Voldemort, the protective runes were able to keep most of his soul inside his body, though a small piece did escape...not that Voldemort was too bothered by the fact at that moment. Severely weakened, his soul having only the most tenuous of grasps on his corporeal body, Voldemort gathered all his strength before activating his last resort, his failsafe: a portkey designed to transport him to a safe hideout.

Voldemort left behind a crying baby with a raw, angry, jagged scar on his forehead and the dead body of his pregnant mother.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore sighed mournfully as he stared at a tin of his beloved lemon drops. Everything, everything had gone wrong. It had been two weeks since the death of Lily Evans Potter, two weeks since Voldemort had been vanquished by young Harry, and everything was still topsy-turvy.

While it had been very fortunate that young Harry had survived, the incident at Godric Hollows had left behind far-reaching and unfortunate repercussions. Peter Pettigrew, a man whom he had known since he was a boy, had been deemed a traitor and informan; he was to be led to Azkaban today, Sirius Black, another man he had once known as a young boy, was to be awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class for his heroic confrontation of Pettigrew, and James Potter...well, James Potter, despite having been healed from his wounds within a day, was basically a wreck.

After Lily's death, James had seen fit to drink himself into a drunken stupor nightly. Even the survival of his two sons (yes two, for the Healers had arrived in time to extract the seven-month old magical baby, who had been able to survive that few extra minutes after his mother's death thanks to the protection by the combined magics of him and his mother, from his mother's womb) did nothing to quail James' despair. Indeed, the presence of young Harry could even be said to have an inflammatory presence on James. It seemed that James had, in his inconsolable grief, irrationally blamed Harry, partly,

for the death of his mother. From what Dumbledore could gather, James felt that it was Harry's playing with his wand which had resulted in him not having a wand during his confrontation with Voldemort. In addition, it was quite clear that Lily had died protecting Harry – yet another fact for James to blame on his firstborn. He had avoided young Harry like a plague since his wife's untimely death, according to Minerva, the situation was made worse by the fact that young Harry had Lily's eyes.

Albus Dumbledore heaved another sigh. If things kept up as it was, he would have to make alternate arrangements for young Harry. In James' current state of mind, he could not be expected to take care of both little Martin and young Harry at the same time. Perhaps...yes, perhaps young Harry could be entrusted to relatives? But James was an only child...in a flash of inspiration, Albus found the answer. He knew that Lily Potter had a sister, a woman by the name of Petunia. Ah, that sweet little girl! She had written to him years ago, pleading desperately to be allowed into Hogwarts. Alas! She had shown not even the slightest hint of magical ability, so he had regretfully rejected her request. But surely, surely her attitude towards magic would have remained unchanged? Albus beamed to himself. Yes, that was a problem solved. Harry could be placed with his aunt for a period of time, until things had calmed down considerably. And Lily's protection, Lily's sacrifice would ensure that young Harry was protected while he was with his relative. After all, it wouldn't do to have the boy-who-lived, as they were calling him now, in danger from anyone who might be still loyal to Voldemort.

And the prophecy...Albus had no doubt that Voldemort would one day return. He had no delusions that what had happened two weeks prior was more than what it was; an interlude of peace for the wizarding world, bought most expensively with Lily's sacrifice and young Harry's destiny. Well, all he could do was to ensure that, when the time came for the prophecy to be fulfilled, young Harry would be more than ready to assume his role as the vanquisher of the dark lord.

As plans were made and discarded in one Albus Dumbledore's, Headmaster of Hogwarts, mind, somewhere, somehow, the wheels of fate begun to turn.

Well, here it is. Hopefully, a decent-length chapter. And I hope the scenario I painted of Lily's death and James' survival was plausible. If you have any comments, I'd love to hear them!

Chapter Two: Rescue

A thin, scrawny and malnourished boy dozed fitfully in the dead quiet of the night. Jet-black hair, dark as night, topped his head, a thin fringe of which covered his forehead, hiding the red lightning bolt scar which marred an otherwise smooth and fair skin. Baggy clothes, most little more than rags, hung on said boy's thin frame, giving him the air of a skeleton wrapped in layers of skin.

The boy rolled over slightly before seeming to wake with a small start. Huge emerald green eyes, shielded by long, thick eyelashes, fluttered open, though it was doubtful that any hint of the colour could be seen through the deep darkness of the room. Or more precisely, cupboard. For this was the boy's bedroom, as it had been for many years now: the cupboard-under-the-stairs.

The boy lazily blinked his eyes as he wondered about what had prompted his early waking. After all, his biological clock was usually pretty accurate - it had to be since his aunt expected him, a six-going-on-seven boy, to wake on his own...ah, that was it! A rush of excitement filled him, leaving him slightly breathless in its wake. Tomorrow is July 31st! My birthday!

For a brief moment, Harry James Potter was happy and excited, just like any normal boy his age. Then, he deflated when he realized that no one was going to care. Not Aunt Petunia, not Uncle Vernon, not his bully of a cousin Dudley. He doubted that he would even receive one present. Not even from his daddy, James Potter, whom he knew was alive, but had, for some reason, abandoned him to the care of his relatives. He knew James Potter was alive because he had heard Aunt Petunia mumbling about the unfairness of it all, about why she should be forced to care for the freak when even his own freaky father refused to do so.

Harry wondered too, sometimes, with bitterness and no little anger. Was he that horrible a son? He knew that he had a younger brother, Martin, whom James seemed to have no problem taking care of. Only him, it was only him that no one wanted. Not his relatives, not his daddy, and perhaps not even his mommy, who had died early in his childhood. Why it was so, Harry had no idea. The Dursleys forbid questions; they hated it. If Harry asked even a single question about his parents, a cuff to the head was the least of his worries. Harry shuddered once more at the thought of Uncle Vernon's fists.

Sighing softly, he decided not to waste his time thinking on what he could not change, but to grab as much sleep as he could.

The next morning, he was awoken by the shrieks of Aunt Petunia. "Boy! Get down here, boy, and make breakfast!" Oh no, oh no! Harry's first thoughts when he startled awake was of dismay and dread. He had overslept, and hence, had not prepared breakfast for the Dursleys.

Rushing out of his cupboard with all the not inconsiderable haste that he could muster, he appeared in the kitchen soon after Aunt Petunia's cry, hoping against hope that his uncle was not yet awake... Only to find Uncle Vernon glaring at him furiously.

"Boy, I have to leave for an important meeting in ten minutes time and what do I find? No breakfast yet!" With a furious bellow, Uncle Vernon strolled to where Harry was standing, frozen to the spot, and backhanded him across the face. Harry felt himself fall to the ground with the force of the blow. Once he was on the ground, he lay there quiescent, as Uncle Vernon aimed a few well-placed kicks at his ribs. Stay quiet, stay quiet...Harry chanted frantically. He had learnt that keeping quiet was the best method when it came to dealing with Uncle Vernon's blows. Soon, Uncle Vernon would grow bored with his lack of reaction and he would leave. Sometimes, Harry wished for someone to rescue him, to save him from his relatives, but that wish never came true. Someday though...but hopefully, his uncle would stop soon...

Sure enough, after a few more kicks, Uncle Vernon gave a grunt of irritation and left the dining room, presumably to get ready for his important meeting. Harry breathed a sigh of relief at that, giving thanks that Uncle Vernon had been in a hurry today...he recalled that a few months ago, he had angered his uncle on a Sunday, and had not managed to hold his cries back...that night, Harry had gone to bed with two black eyes, a sprained arm and multiple bruises on his body. Luckily for him, for the Dursleys would not, for all the world, bring him to see a doctor, his body had healed the damages by the next day.

As it would this time around too. He had always had the ability to heal at a faster rate than normal, along with all the other freakish powers he displayed from time to time. Like the ability to turn his

teacher's wig blue, the ability to grow out his hair if he so wished, the ability to blend into the shadows such that no one noticed him or jump onto the school's roof if he concentrated, and, his most treasured ability, that of speaking to snakes.

Harry had discovered the last ability one morning when he had been sent to weed the garden. He had stared in shock and some fear at the small little black snake curled up in the grass, before he had heard the snake speak. 'Sssstupid humansss...disssturbing my sssleep.'

For a moment, Harry had wondered if he was going crazy, to the extent of hearing voices from snakes, but his lips had already formed an automatic response before he could do anything. 'Sssorry...' The little black snake had stared at Harry for a moment before replying, 'You can ssspeak...interesssting, human child...' And that had been the start of the tentative friendship between human and snake...

Late afternoon. Harry stumbled to the rock in the garden where the little black snake could usually be found, hoping to catch a glimpse of his friend. All day long, Aunt Petunia had kept him busy with chores, supposedly in punishment for waking up late, though Harry did not really see the difference between his punishment and his usual chores, since he usually had to do them anyway...It was just his luck, really, that he had to endure a beating and do chores even though it was his birthday...

'Greetingsss ssspeaker...happy hatch-day...' The little black snake slithered up Harry's arm, causing Harry to giggle slightly. How strange! For his first and only birthday wish to come from a little blacksnake of all things... 'Thank you...' Harry proceeded to have a small conversation with the snake, interested in learning about all the adventures that the snake had in Aunt Petunia's gardens and that of her neighbours...unaware of the fact that, at this very moment, there were eyes watching him.

Eyes that were crimson in colour, reminiscent of the colour of fresh blood. Eyes belonging to the Dark Lord Voldemort, eyes narrowed in contemplation at the sight of the Potter brat speaking Parseltongue. To say that Voldemort was astonished was a complete understatement. The Potter family line had never shown any signs

of parselmouths before, and as far as he knew, he was the last wizard alive who possessed that rare ability. Strange indeed.

All day long, Voldemort had watched as the Potter brat had gone about his daily life. From the beatings delivered by the fat Muggle to the chores assigned by the horsy-looking one, he had observed with surprise as the boy who had caused his downfall almost six years prior had been treated like a house-elf. And with no sight of his father all day, Voldemort had wondered at the treatment of the boy.

For six years, Voldemort had bided his time. Waiting in his safe-house, gathering magic to him slowly, until he had enough to perform dark and dangerous rituals meant to return him to his full strength. He had not contacted any of his followers, not even the supposedly most loyal ones, for he had been wary that they might try to take the opportunity to dispose of him. It was after all, what Voldemort would have done had he been in their position. Having only recovered his full magical strength recently, Voldemort had then set about catching up with current affairs, wondering what the Light side had been doing all these time.

It had mostly been as he expected. Some of his followers were jailed in Azkaban, some pleaded being under the influence of the Imperious curse, while others faded away into obscurity. He had noted, with sardonic amusement, that Peter Pettigrew, sneaky rat that he was, had somehow managed to escape from Azkaban. He had no doubt that Wormtail was not dead, no the rat was far too cowardly to die that easily. Perhaps he would call him back soon, if only so that he would have someone to cast the Cruciatus on when he was irritated.

Voldemort had been pleased when he found out that Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband Rodolphus was not amongst the ones currently incarcerated at Azkaban. Apparently, Bellatrix's loyalty had not blinded her; she had had enough sense of self-preservation to run, and was currently in hiding. Dear Bella, always so eager to please...maybe he should call her back instead...

Thus far, Voldemort had not called any of his old followers back, despite having regained his full strength. For he had wanted to do one thing first: dispose of the so-called Boy-who-lived on his own. He wished to show that he was much more powerful than the brat, and that the prophecy was wrong. A show of might, of power, to cow

the world once more. Yet imagine his surprise when he had found out that little Harry Potter seemed to have vanish off the face of the Earth. He was not staying with his father, who apparently had a new family, having remarried some bint. He had been slightly bemused at the fact that the little Mudblood's second son had survived, and even wondered if he ought to have used the killing curse on the Mudblood instead of the slower suffocation curse. But the Potters had not been his main focus, so he had not done anything to them. Instead, he had focused his efforts on finding where little Harry Potter resided.

Imagine his stunned astonishment when he found out that Harry Potter was living with his Muggle relatives. Apparently, the old fool Dumbledore had thought that the blood wards enabled by his mudblood mother's sacrifice would protect him from Voldemort as long as the boy was living with her only living relative. Well, there was a simple way around blood wards, and Voldemort was going to prove that now.

Making his form visible to the boy and the boy only, Voldemort idly considered if a glamour would work better for his purposes before dismissing it. Voldemort was not ashamed of his appearance, he would be damned if he changed it for the brat. Strolling up to the gates of the garden, he waited for the boy to notice him.

'Harry Potter.' Voldemort watched as the boy looked up at him suspiciously. A small flash of anger vibrated through his body at the sight of the mark on the boy's face. No matter what, the boy was a magical child; no mere Muggle should be allowed to touch him. The fools...what were they thinking, placing a magical child, whose father was still alive and well, with a Muggle family? Voldemort felt hatred and disgust well up inside of him at the Light in general and Albus Dumbledore specifically.

'How do you know my name?' The boy asked, his stance one of one ready for flight. Interesting. The brat apparently had a healthy sense of self-preservation, even at this young age. So unlike his foolish Gryffindor parents. Though Voldemort was surprised that the boy had not run off already, given how frightening he must have looked. 'I know your name, child, because I am a wizard. As are you.' The boy's emerald green eyes widened into large orbs as he processed that bit of information, his head tilting to one side in a thoughtful manner. Any other boy might have denied it, or asked for proof,

instead, the boy nodded slowly, before replying, 'That explains the thingsss that I can do then...wait, you can ssspeak the ssspecial language too!'

Voldemort allowed a hint of a smile to grace his lips...err, where his lips would have been if he had some. 'Indeed. It is called Parsssel tongue, this language we ssspeak. It is a ssspecial language indeed. Even amongsst wizards, few can ssspeak it.' A smile blossomed on the child's face at that. 'So I'm ssspecial then? Mr. Wizard, are you here to rescue me?'

Voldemort's face twitched slightly at that. The boy had just handed him an opening on the silver platter! 'Yesss, child, I am. And I am called Lord Voldemort.' He added the last slightly irritably, not wishing to be called Mr. Wizard for even a few more times. 'But to do that, I need some of your blood, child.' He conjured up a silver dagger and a silver bowl carefully, ensuring that Ministry detectors would not detect it, before he passed the items to the brat over the fence, waiting to see what the boy would do.

The boy scrunched his face up thoughtfully before peering at Voldemort with his brilliant green eyes. Then, having made up his mind, he cut open his left palm with the dagger. Not a prick, not a shallow cut, but cut it open with a long, deep stroke before bleeding into the silver was once again struck by surprise. No stranger to pain then, this one. And quite intelligent and brave too. Against his will, he could not help but feel a sense of kinship to the boy.

Taking the offered silver bowl back from the boy, he banished the dagger before pointing his wand at the bowl, murmuring a few words under his breath and tracing bloody runes with the boy's blood on the outside of the bowl. Then, the ritual done, he drank the rest of the blood that was in the bowl before banishing the bowl too. As he took the blood into his body, he felt the blood wards around the house and the boy become receptive to him. He smiled in satisfaction; it would no longer protect the boy from him.

Glancing at the boy, he was surprised to see a look of intrigue and fascination on the boy's face, instead of the disgust and fear he had expected. Truly, the boy was a marvel indeed. In a split second, he had made up his mind. No, he wouldn't kill Harry Potter today. What he would do with him, he had not decided yet, but he would take the boy with him for the time being. For Lord Voldemort, was, before he

had been a dark lord, a scholar. And the scholar in him found that he would quite like to unravel the mystery that was Harry Potter.

Opening the garden gate with a flick of his wand, he entered and led the boy outside the garden gently. "Hold on to me tightly child, I am going to apparate us out of here." At the boy's vigorous nodding and to eyes filled with gratitude, Voldemort and Harry both vanished from Privet Drive.

I hope I managed to balance Harry's child-like naiveté and his sense of self-preservation well. As I have no idea what seven-year-olds' thought processes are like, Harry might be mature for his age, but I'm hoping that can be passed off as a side-effect of his childhood with the Dursleys. Please do leave reviews!

Chapter Three: Conversation

Harry stared around in awe at the glamorous surroundings of what the red-eyed man had called his manor. The red-eyed man had teleported, or rather appa...apparate (Harry had figured out that the term was a wizarding way of describing teleportation), then to what looked like an atrium of sorts, before leading Harry to his study. Harry had stared wide-eyed at the lofty pillars of white marble rising from the black marble floors of the manor to end in intricately carved buttresses near the ceiling as well as the floating orbs of light interspersed at regular intervals. Following in the wake of the man and his billowing robes, Harry had then gaped at the few moving and talking portraits on the walls of the corridor leading to the study. Whispers followed him as he walked down the corridor.

"A new human..." This was from a portrait of an old, decrepit old man.

"...who he is..." A surly witch whispered those words to her cat.

'Sss...wonder how he tastesss...' The last was in Parseltongue, hissed by a huge snake curled up on the shoulders of a majestic-looking man.

Harry had shivered once before catching up to the red-eyed man.

Upon entering the study, Harry found himself greeted by dark wooden furnishings, a cozy stone fireplace, dark stone flooring and shelves upon shelves of books on filling up two of the walls. Fascinated by the sheer amount of books in the man's study, Harry had even managed to forget about the throbbing pain in his palm, where he had cut himself with that silver blade, until the man had, with a small frown, wave his wand over Harry's palm to heal it.

Now, staring in surprise at his unblemished skin, Harry shifted slightly from foot to foot. The crimson-eyed man was currently seated behind his desk, while Harry remained standing in front of it, since there did not appear to be a place for him to seat. Not that it mattered to Harry. Indeed, all he could do at the moment was to gape at the display of magic and wonder how he could get the red-eyed man to heal his other wounds as well. Would a simple plea do? Something told Harry that would not be the case at all. After all, since when did others help Harry upon request?

Voldemort looked on in no little amusement as the boy tried to find a way to get him to heal his wounds. He had purposely healed only the cut, interested in finding out how the brat would react in such a situation, delighting in watching the boy struggle to ask for his help.

Then a flash of inspiration struck Harry. "Er...Mister Voldemort...sir..." He added as an afterthought, unsure of how respectful he should be. After all, the man radiated power and strength, and he had even rescued Harry from the evil clutches of the Dursleys. At the man's gesture allowing him to continue, Harry ducked his head and asked softly, "I was wondering...if you could show me more...of that wonderful magic? Are you able to...heal my other injuries, sir?"

Voldemort almost laughed out loud at that. The boy was interesting indeed. Trying to manipulate him to heal the wounds with both a show of flattery and a questioning challenge, it was an attempt worthy of a child five years older than Harry's current age. And a Slytherin child at that, Voldemort mused. He was truly delighted to see such Slytherin cunningness in a child born of two Gryffindor parents. But no, it would not do to have the child think that he could manipulate Lord Voldemort.

"Yes, child, I am able to do so, but tell me: why should I heal you?" Voldemort threw the question at the child, waiting to see how he would react. Harry flinched at the question. Why indeed. Nothing more than a freak, he did not deserve to be healed did he? But yet, something in the man's tone of voice told Harry that this was not a taunt, not a sneer, but something else. The man was trying to tell Harry something, and Harry just had to find out what.

Thinking back on the man's words, Harry winced when he finally found the answer. The man had rescued him, healed his cut, and here he was trying to trick him into healing his other wounds..."No reason, sir. I'm sorry..." He ducked his head as his cheeks burned with shame.

"Look at me, child." Reluctantly, Harry looked up. "You do not have anything to be sorry for. There is nothing wrong with manipulation, nor with the attempt on me. I was simply trying to show you that you are as yet not adept at the art. As such, it would have been better if you had made an outright request than an attempt at subtlety. A

different tactic to be sure, but one that might have worked better on a master of the art like me. Granted, you do not know me that well yet, so I must commend you on your attempt."

Harry's eyes widened at that statement as he contemplated what the man with red eyes was trying to say. He was trying to teach him! Harry realized a moment later. In all his life, other than the teachers in school, no other adult had been bothered to teach Harry anything. Eyes shining with gratitude, Harry nodded before speaking, "I understand now, Mister Voldemort sir." He paused for a moment, wondering if he should continue, before deciding to plunge on ahead, "Would...would you heal me then? Please?"

Voldemort nodded in satisfaction as the boy showed signs of understanding. Very good. The boy was intelligent indeed, with a fine instinct for the cunningness that manipulation often required. Voldemort was getting more and more attached to the boy by the moment, which prompted him to pause. Perhaps...perhaps he should tell the boy of his heritage? After all, the boy reminded him so very much of his younger self. It would be intriguing to see the boy's reaction, Voldemort mused. Yes, perhaps he would allow himself this small indulgence. It had been six years, after all, since he last had the chance to indulge himself.

Twirling his wand slightly, Voldemort healed the child before conjuring a comfortable chair for the child to sit in. "Make yourself comfortable child." The child flashed him a smile before hopping onto the chair. "Thank you, Mister Voldemort sir." Ah, and adequately polite too, even if the honourifics he use are deplorable.

Now, where to start... "Child, you are a wizard. Now, judging by your shocked expression previously, I shall proceed with the assumption that your Muggle relatives have not told you of your heritage." Voldemort waited for the boy's meek nod before proceeding. "Your mother, Lily Evans Potter, died on Halloween six years ago - she was killed, child." At the child's look of stunned horror, Voldemort raised an eyebrow.

"The Dursleys told me she died in a car crash!" Harry spluttered out. The red-eyed man sneered at that. "Obviously, those Muggles lied to you. Lily Potter was a witch – though spawned from Muggles, non-magical people, she might have been, a car crash would not have killed her. Now, do you know why she died?" Harry shook his

head slightly, even as his mind rapidly processed the information. Strangely enough, the mention of her death did not faze him at all. He felt a slight sadness that he had lost a mother, true enough, but other than that, the only other emotion he felt was curiosity as to how a witch like her would have died.

"Your mother was killed in a war between two factions of the wizarding world. One side was the Light, while the other was Dark." Harry furrowed his eyebrows slightly. "Is it like gangs, Mister Voldemort sir? Like how Dudley's gang fights with Corin's gang over sweets and colour pencils in school?" The man's face twitched, almost irritably. "Yes, you could say so. But child, what they were fighting over are much more important than trinkets. The Light wanted a peaceful co-existence with Muggles, and felt that the way to do so was to keep the wizarding world a secret from those who have no magic. Yet Muggleborns, witches and wizards born of non-wizarding parents, were allowed into the wizarding world. The Light felt that Muggles and wizards could co-exist peacefully, with the former having no inkling of the latter's presence. Think child, think of the probability that the secret could have been kept for much longer, what with the Muggle rapid advancement with technology and the increasing population of the wizarding world.

"And what do you think will happen when the Muggles finally discover our presence child? Think of the weapons of mass destruction that those Muggles have come up with and how they have used them on people whom they deemed different." The man paused for a moment to regard Harry with cool, assessing eyes. For his part, Harry frantically tried to understand all the new pieces of information that the man had given him. The best he could do at the moment was to understand that the man thought non-magical people were a threat to wizards. And given how his relatives, as well as all the other children and adults in his life had treated him so far, Harry was inclined to agree with the man.

As soon as Harry nodded in response to the man's words, the red-eyed man continued with his story. "Now, the Dark, on the other hand, had different goals. They feel that whether within the wizarding world or not, the ability to rule should be given to ones with the most wisdom and power, it is only thus that there will be intelligent and incorrupt governance. And since Muggles are unworthy and inferior to wizards, wizards should have absolute power over them. And incidents like your abuse at the hands of your

Muggle relations would never happen to any wizarding children. Steps should be taken, to prevent that at all costs!" And Harry fiercely agreed with that sentiment, years of abuse and neglect at the Dursleys' hand cementing his dislike of non-magical people. He could see the passion in the man, the belief in his own words, and best of all, the willpower to do something about it – Harry found his respect for the man growing.

"And now we come to your mother, child." The man's voice softened almost imperceptibly. "I will not lie to you, child. I am the Dark Lord Voldemort, the leader of the Dark. Your parents served the Light – we were on opposite sides of the war. And they had defied me time and again. On Halloween night six years ago, I went after them. I was the one who killed your mother child. And I will not deny that I had every intention of killing you as well. Yet, upon casting the Killing Curse on you, the curse rebounded and you survived, while I, I was reduced to a weakened state. Thus, you will find that most of the wizarding world hails you as the one who defeated me."

Harry's jaws had grown steadily wider and wider as the man had continued his speech. By the last sentence however, he was openly gaping. He had defeated the man in front of him when he was a baby? But how? When he asked the man that, the red-eyed man narrowed his eyes slightly before replying that it was probably due to his mother sacrificing her life for him. It was then that the true impact of the man's speech hit him. This man, this crimson-eyed person, was the one who had killed his mother!

Yet he was also the person who had fulfilled all the birthday wishes that he made since he was old enough to make them; he was the person who had rescued Harry from the abuse of the Dursleys. And he was the person who had opened Harry's eyes to the presence of magic, the person who could speak the special language too, the person who had taken enough interest in Harry to teach him things. And best of all, he had told Harry the truth about his heritage and his family.

Put that way, Harry could not bring himself to hate or even dislike the man. He felt some anger, true, but only in an abstract way that soon gave way to curiosity. "Umm, Mister Voldemort...why did you want to kill me?" The red-eyed man blinked slowly before replying slowly, "There was a prophecy, child. A prophecy that said that a

child born as July ended would be the one who vanquishes me. My attack was meant to be a pre-emptive strike."

Oh, that explains it then...Harry could certainly understand the concept of striking first. Like the time when he had set the little black snake on Dudley when it appeared that he was in danger of getting punched by the boy. "Okay then..." Harry's reply was accepting. He watched the man's reaction as a flash of disbelief settled on the man's face for a few seconds before disappearing. Then, staring into the man's red eyes, he made eye contact for a few seconds. When the man finally blinked, Harry could not help but feel that something had passed between them.

Voldemort had been extremely intrigued at the child's reaction. Instead of fear, anger or even hatred, the child seemed to dismiss his killing of his mother and his attempt to kill him easily. Thus, peering into the child's eyes, Voldemort had then used Legilimency to find the reasoning behind his intentions. What he saw there had first surprised him, then pleased him greatly. It appeared that, devoid of any positive influences in his young life, the child was just this side of amoral. Well, that made things easier for Voldemort – for he had decided to keep the child with him for the time being, and perhaps even train him into a loyal follower. He found himself quite taken with the boy, as he had never been with any living person, not even his protégé Bellatrix. But wait, the child had opened his mouth again...

"Mister Voldemort sir, I promise I won't van...vankishes...you, so there's no need to kill me..." the child stated with an open, earnest expression free of any deceit. Voldemort could only smile at the child's sincerity. "Very well, child. Now, that's enough talk for tonight. I know you must be hungry and tired, so we will be having dinner now. And do not worry, you will be staying here with me for quite some time, so there will be plenty of opportunities for further questions." Getting up from his leather chair, Voldemort led the way to the dining room.

Uncharacteristically, the Dark Lord did not lie to Harry. As an adept manipulator, he could read people accurately and he knew that the truth was the only way to Harry's wholehearted acceptance of the Dark. Especially when he was young enough to influence.

And the Dark Lord won't be adopting Harry yet, not for another couple of chapters. Harry needs time to warm up to Voldemort - his life thus far at the Dursleys have taught him nothing but mistrust for adults. But I'd say that Voldemort telling Harry the truth gained him points!

Any thoughts or comments? Do leave reviews to tell me what you think of the pace of the story and the Harry-Voldemort relationship that I have portrayed thus far!

Chapter 4: Nightmare

Harry had been staying at his rescuer's manor for a couple of days when the dreams started. Thus far, he had enjoyed his days at the manor, which were spent either reading, exploring the manor, or talking to the man and his pet snake. Harry had been shocked when he had gone down to the dining room for breakfast the morning after he had arrived to see a huge gigantic snake curled around the man. The crimson eyed man had introduced her as Nagini, his pet viper, and seemed amused when Harry had tentatively extended a greeting.

'Greetingsss, Nagini...' Harry had hissed politely, using the standard greeting that the little black snake had taught him. 'Greetingsss, youngling. Ssso polite. Itsss good to sssee another ssspeaker...' Nagini had quite taken to Harry after that, and now, more often than not, accompanied Harry on his exploratory trips around the manor.

It could have been the excitement getting to him, Harry supposed, but on the third night after he arrived, he started having dreams of Uncle Vernon punching, kicking, and generally hitting him. In his dreams, Aunt Petunia usually stood by the side watching, while Dudley, if present, had the role of egging his uncle on. As a result, more often than not, Harry found himself waking in the middle of the night as he shuddered from the after-effects of his nightmare. And tonight, apparently, was no different.

No, please...In his dream, Harry begged and pleaded even as a purpled-face Uncle Vernon, with his meaty fists, pounded again and again into his back. Please stop, stop, don't hurt me... Dimly, he could make out his uncle's words, scolding him for being a freak of nature, for being stupid, for being a useless ingrate, for hurting Dudley with his freakish powers. As his uncles spewed that last line, he drew back his boulder-sized arm and let fly a punch aimed at Harry's face...

"Child, wake up. Wake up now!" Harry dimly registered the fact that a masculine, cold and commanding voice was ordering him to wake up, before he opened his eyes and peered blearily at the darkened room, which was slowly coming into focus. Dark green silk sheets, muted stone walls, lush green curtains hanging from his four-poster bed...nope, this was not the cupboard which he had grown up in.

And the pasty-faced, tall and bald man with crimson red eyes, robed in black standing beside his bed was not Uncle Vernon.

Lord Voldemort...As the Dark Lord's presence registered, Harry slowly calmed his previously rapid breathing. A nightmare, only a nightmare...Uncle Vernon can't hurt me now...Even so, he did not manage to reach a relaxed state until the Dark Lord slowly sat down on Harry's bed and placed a long, thin spindly hand on his head. As soon as the man did that, the tension just suddenly bled out of Harry as he relaxed bonelessly, into the calming touch. Even though the man had killed his mother, he still felt most comfortable around him.

The Dark Lord lay his hand on Harry's head for a few minutes before withdrawing said hand. Even so, the hand did not go far away as it reached under Harry's chin and tilted his head so that he was looking straight into the Dark Lord's eyes. "You were having a nightmare. About...your uncle's abuse." It was a statement, not a question, so Harry did not reply, even though he lowered his eyes in embarrassment. For some inexplicable reason, Harry did not want the man, whom he had known for barely two weeks, view him as weak.

"Look at me, child." Harry obeyed rather reluctantly, raising his emerald green eyes to meet cool crimson ones. "You are not weak. Remember my words; I will not have you believing otherwise." Nodding weakly, Harry could almost believe this man, this person who had saved him from his relatives. "However...this could become your weakness. A weakness that others may exploit in the future, one which you must rid yourself of." Flushing slightly, Harry forced himself not to squirm and to continue meeting the Dark Lord's eyes. Despite his youth, Harry could understand the man's reasoning. It was just like how Dudley, knowing Harry's fear of Uncle Vernon's beatings, would always try to get Harry into trouble. It was no great stretch to believe that others would be capable of doing so too.

"Tell me, child, how do you feel about your Muggle relatives?" The man asked suddenly, in a seeming change of subject. Harry frowned slightly in thought. How did he feel about Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and Dudley? Well, the answer was quite simple wasn't it? His uncle continuously abused him all the time, Aunt Petunia turned a blind eye and Dudley actively tried to get Harry into as much trouble as possible. "I hate them! I hate them a lot!" burst out of Harry's mouth childishly.

The Dark Lord however, did not laugh at this seemingly childish proclamation. Instead, sneered, "Indeed. They have undeniably given you a reason to do so." Then, his expression turned serious as he addressed Harry. "I want you to listen to me very carefully, child. Yes, you have grounds for hating them. Your hatred is reasonable, logical and not wrong. Yet, I say that it is not right either."

For a moment, Harry could hardly believe his ears. The man did not think Harry should hate his relatives? Even after all that they had done to him? Harry opened his mouth to object vehemently, but before he could say a single word, the Dark Lord had continued. "Hush, child. Do not interrupt, listen to my words." He fixed Harry with his stare until Harry closed his mouth meekly and nodded. "I repeat, child, you should not be feeling hatred for those Muggles. For they do not deserve your hatred. They are like the slugs living in the mud; utterly worthless, contemptible and disgusting. The most that you should feel for them is cool disdain, just like how you would treat any insect or creature. If you should come across them in the future, crush them as you would any annoying fly. Do not obsess over thoughts of revenge, do not make that your goal in life. They are not worthy of your hatred, child. Do you understand me?"

Harry's eyes had widened as the man lectured him on his attitude towards his relatives. While with any other person Harry might have, with his seven-year old mentality, childishly tuned out their words, his gratitude and ensuing respect towards the man had caused him to listen closely. Frowning in concentration, he tried to put together all the thoughts and ideas that the man had expressed in that little speech, before hesitantly nodding.

"Er, Mister Voldemort sir..." Harry had decided to call the man that, for his teacher had always told him to be polite and to remember his 'mister's and 'sir's, and the man had told him that his name was Voldemort. He was puzzled at the man's raised eyebrow, but waited patiently for the man's sharp nod before continuing, "I think so. You are saying I should not hate them...because hatred is worth something...and they are not worth it?" He was rewarded with a small lipless smile and a tinge of warmth in those crimson eyes. "Very good, child. That is correct. Now, you might be wondering why I brought this up. Think on this, child. Your hatred feeds your fear.

Do not hate them, let go of your hatred and you'll soon find that your fear of them and what they can do to you would have diminished."

Harry stared uncomprehendingly at the man for a few seconds before his brain got to work on those statements. So. He should not hate the Dursleys because he would fear them? And his fear was causing his nightmares? So if he stopped hating them, he'd not fear them, then he wouldn't have any more nightmares! That did make sense to Harry...he smiled up at the Dark Lord happily, "You're so clever, Mister Voldemort sir! Okay, I'll try."

For a moment, the man looked shocked at Harry's response. Bemusedly, he shook his head slightly before he recovered. "I have no doubts that, given enough time and effort, you will be able to do so, child. Good night." Harry responded with a brilliant smile. "Good night, Mister Voldemort."

Bright, emerald green eyes stared up at James unblinkingly. "Why did you abandon me, Daddy? Why don't you love me anymore?" Covered with blood, the dark-haired child reached out to James with pleading, beseeching hands... "Daddy..."

"Daddy, Daddy!" The loud high pitched cries, in addition to the soft tugging of his hands woke James from his dream...nightmare. Opening his eyes blearily, he turned to look at the child who was currently clamouring for his attention. Soft, dark auburn curls framed a cherubic face, from which round hazel eyes peeped out anxiously. For a moment, James was reminded of another child, his firstborn, whom had the same eye-shape...the nightmare flashed through his mind before he resolutely pushed the image away. The boy is safe...James told himself stubbornly. Albus did those wards personally...

Burying the small tendril of guilt that had tried to curl around his heart, James turned his full attention on his son, his little Marty, Martin Charlus Potter. "Marty, what's wrong?" James asked softly, hoisting his son up onto the bed to sit on his lap. "I...I had a bad dream, Daddy...monster...monster was chasing me..." Martin sniffed as he hugged his father tightly. Beside James, sounds of his wife stirring could be heard.

"What is it, James?" asked Samantha Potter nee Macdonald as blinked her dark grey eyes sleepily. Coppery bronze hair stuck to

her face as she turned so that she was faced him. "Marty has a nightmare again?" She queried sharply before she could stop herself, wincing as Martin Potter started sobbing. Chill, Samantha, don't scare the boy. "Oh my, sweetie, I'm so sorry. Mommy didn't mean to scare you," Samantha fussed over the child as she moved to draw him into her embrace. Though at first, she had married James Potter only for his fame and fortune, and the privilege of being known as the Boy-who-lived's step-mother, over the years, she had developed a soft spot for the two males who shared her bed.

"Monsters don't exist, Marty," James moved closer so that he could envelope both his wife and son in a warm embrace. At least, they shouldn't exist in this world...though Albus says that monster is still alive somewhere... "It's alright, bad dreams can't hurt you, Daddy's here for you..." Murmuring words of comfort to his beloved son, he glanced over at his wife of three years, taking in her caring demeanor appreciatively. He was truly grateful to Sammie for being there for him, for if not for her presence, he knew he would never have escaped the deep funk he had found himself in after her death...Before he could dwell on that further however, he ruthlessly squashed it, choosing to concentrate on the here and now. He had a loving wife and a cute son...they were his family now, he would not think of any other.

The Dark Lord Voldemort mentally shook his head as he exited from the child's room. It had been years, decades even, since someone had dared to address him by his moniker. Created in his youth, only those of his followers who had been his schoolmates had used it. When he finally rose to power, none had dared to use it, he had merely been referred to as the Dark Lord amongst his followers and other hyphenated references by his detractors. And now, to hear a mere child use it with impunity and without the slightest hint of fear...the Dark Lord could only marvel at the quirks of the situation.

Still, everything about the boy was rather special. He had entered the child's rooms when Nagini had alerted him to loud sounds coming from said room, only to find the boy thrashing in his sleep due to a nightmare. Using Legilimency, Voldemort had brushed against the boy's mind gently, only to see the child entrapped in a nightmare where he was being abused repeatedly. For a moment, that had triggered a flash of empathy from the Dark Lord, who still remembered the days of his own abuse at the orphanage. Oh, he had had his rather bloodthirsty revenge on them of course, but still,

nothing could erase the fact that he had once suffered under the hands of Muggles. That flash of empathy had caused Voldemort to offer the boy uncharacteristic words of comfort, before he had decided rather abruptly, that the boy needed to overcome his weakness, for Voldemort did not much appreciate being awoken in the middle of the night. That had prompted a rather lengthy explanation on Voldemort's part, on why hatred of the Muggles was not encouraged, even if he did despise them to the core. Voldemort had had to exert tight control on himself the day he had collected the child. A large part of him had wanted to lash out at the Muggles for daring to lay hands on a wizarding child - to deliver a few rounds of the Cruciatus followed by a very painful death. However, that would have only served to alert Dumbledore; as it was, all that Dumbledore would glean was that Harry Potter had suddenly vanished from his relatives' home (Voldemort had ensured that the Squib watching the house had been suitably distracted at that time).

Considering his own almost overwhelming dislike of Muggles, Voldemort had been pleasantly surprised that the child had understood what he was getting at. Perhaps it was not a far stretch after all, to believe that the child possessed enough potential to be the one in the prophecy. Harry James Potter – the boy-who-lived indeed. Now, Voldemort just had to decide on exactly what to do with the child. He had an idea. Even though he had initially planned on turning the boy to the dark, to raise him to be one of his faithful followers as a show of power to the light side, he was now reconsidering if that might be a waste of such potential...a maturity that belied his age, a high magical potential, the ability to speak Parseltongue...the boy was talented indeed.

Indeed, the subtle scan of the boy's magic that Voldemort had performed on the child the night he came to the manor proved as much. Whereas most children that age had but a small magical core, the child's core was double, no, almost triple the size of the norm, such that it could easily have belonged to any child three or four years his elder. The boy could become powerful indeed, with the proper training and guidance. And Voldemort had this rather insatiable urge to be the one to do so. Perhaps, he mused, it was from his left-over ambition to become a Defense Against Dark Arts teacher, which had never been fulfilled.

It was a risky idea, yes, of that there was no doubt. There was always the possibility of the boy turning on him after all. But then,

the same could be said of any Death Eater, couldn't it? And Voldemort had confidence in his ability to mould the boy to his liking. The child was young enough, after all, to be turned to the Dark, despite his parentage. And his experiences thus far, under the hands of his Muggle relatives, would only serve to aid Voldemort in this aspect.

As the Dark Lord Voldemort made up his mind about one Harry James Potter, the wheels of fate set in motion years ago by Albus Dumbledore suddenly came to an abrupt halt. When it finally started again, it had changed its direction...

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ...yet this shall not come to pass if him the Dark Lord coaches...the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ..."

In the lofty reaches of the Divination classroom of the North Tower, Sybill Trelawny moaned out this prophecy in a harsh voice as she oversaw the detention of her student. Intent upon washing the teacups and teapots of his teacher, the student did not pay the Divination teacher any mind, for, as everyone knew, Trelawny was a quack and made false prophecies which never came true once every lesson.

Okay, I shall just go with the theory (totally made-up) that a prophecy made with identical words but with some additional phrase will override any preceding prophecies on the same subject. So Trelawny's first prophecy is, as of now, cancelled.

And I think Dumbledore is too careless; three days after Harry's disappearance and he still hasn't found out that the Boy-who-lived is no longer at Privet Drive! Hahaha.

Cheers!

Chapter Five: Choices

Harry knocked on the door twice, waiting for the crisp "Enter" before opening the door of the Dark Lord's study. He had been living at the man's manor for a month already, and this was merely the second time that he had been allowed into the study, the first being the day that the man had brought Harry to the manor.

In the past month, Harry had slowly caught up on the history and culture of the Wizarding World, after his initial shock of having a whole new world opened up to him. Mornings were spent exploring the mansion, which was full of interesting things like the house elves, the talking portraits and Nagini, the Dark Lord's snake. Afternoons were dedicated to his studies; Harry loved reading just about everything he could get his hands on from the library in the Dark Lord's manor. His favourite book by far was "The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts", mainly because it had such a huge section on the man who had rescued him, even though he also liked "Modern Magical History", "Magical Theory" and "Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century". It was with no little shock that Harry had found himself listed in the book, alongside the Dark Lord in the last book, and he wondered sometimes, if he was supposed to be that famous, then why was he sent to live with abusive Muggles?

The Dark Lord helped him in the evenings; he often answered Harry's questions during their nightly interaction sessions, though he had refused to say more about Harry's mother's death other than what he had told him on the first night. However, he had begun to teach Harry what Harry had come to call etiquette lessons; namely, mannerisms on how to act properly in the presence of strangers. When he had first brought it up, Harry had flushed upon hearing the reason for it; apparently, the Dark Lord did not like to be addressed as 'Mister Voldemort sir'.

"Good evening, sir." Harry made sure that his bow was correctly angled, smiling brilliantly at him when the man seated behind the desk nodded his approval. It was quite strange really, reconciling the pale-skinned man poring through official looking documents with the Dark Lord Harry had read about in the history books, who had apparently gone around randomly killing Muggles and his enemies. Harry had accepted the man's explanations however, when he had explained that his actions were never random and were always done

with furthering his cause in mind. Which made sense, really, for how else would such a brilliant man act?

"Child, I've called you here today to discuss something of great importance." Harry felt the weight of the man's full attention fall upon him. He glanced at the Dark Lord curiously, wondering what could be so important, feeling crimson eyes watch him closely. "This past month, you've been reading up on the history of the wizarding world. You roughly know what my goals are, what the war was about and why I killed your mother. So far, I have not pried into your feelings about it, and have left you alone to come to your own conclusions, but now I am here to offer you a choice."

Harry nodded, a strange anxiousness gripping him. Why was the Dark Lord bringing up all these now? Even with his current child-like mind, Harry knew that he was in agreement with the man's goals. Why should Voldemort not get to rule the wizards, when the Ministry was so incompetent and the wizarding world in so much danger from the Muggles? Voldemort was brilliant and powerful, just like the wizard Merlin, the perfect candidate to conquer the world and make it a better place. A place where wizarding children like him would not have to suffer the abuse of Muggles. And Harry could well understand the bad acts done during war. Just like how his classmates and friends had abandoned him when they were threatened by Dudley and gang. Harry didn't blame them then, and he found that he did not blame the Dark Lord either. In times of war, he accepted that people sometimes had to do bad things.

The part that was giving Harry some trouble though, was that the man before him had supposedly killed his mother, thus resulting in his biological father's depression and his subsequent abandonment thereby depriving him of a normal childhood. He wasn't really angry at the man for the killing itself, as his mother was a notion to him, which he wasn't really capable of appreciating. He had a vague feeling that one's parents were supposed to take care of you and make you happy, but that was all. His mother had died and his biological father had not wanted him at all, so he did not really feel the loss save when it had caused him an unhappy childhood. But that blame could be placed on the person who had left him with the Dursleys, who was most assuredly not the Dark Lord.

The man, who had been patiently waiting for Harry to finish his thoughts, now continued, "If you are not able to accept me, child, the

first option, is for you to be left with a respectable family of neutral standing in the war. They would raise and care for you as if you were their own, giving you as happy a childhood as you would have had. Of course, in such a case, your memories of this past month would have to be modified, for I cannot allow news of my presence to reach the public as yet. If, on the other hand, you are able to accept my authority and past actions, the second option would be for you to continue as you were, here, as a ward of my house. I would of course, continue with your lessons and guide you as I see fit. You are not required to take any sides in the upcoming war and upon reaching the age of majority, you would be free to live your own life. The third option..." While the first two options had been mentioned neutrally and emotionlessly, by the time the Dark Lord got to the last offer, the man paused slightly before continuing, showing a slight hesitation that was so uncharacteristic that Harry's eyes widened in surprise.

"The third option would be for you to stay in this house as my magically adopted child. I would perform a ritual, after which, to all magical and legal effects and purposes, you would be my heir and son. You would be required to accept my full and complete authority over you, in return for which I shall care for your welfare and education to the best of my ability. You would be required to, at the very least, remain neutral in the war. I will not tolerate any betrayalsss." The last sentence was said with a slight hiss, emphasizing the underlying threat behind the words.

Harry could only gape as the Dark Lord made his last offer. Voldemort...Voldemort was willing to make Harry his son? To become the father that Harry never had? A part of Harry wanted to weep with happiness. All his life, he had been labelled a freak, unwanted, ignored and disliked. Never before had anyone showered such attention and affection upon him. Harry was almost overwhelmed. Here was the Dark Lord, offering to make up for all the parental affection that he never had, willing to become the one thing in the world that Harry would kill for – family. All his previous considerations, thoughts, reservations that he should have flew out of his mind as his emotions gurgled with exaltation.

"I...I..." Tears of happiness streamed down Harry's face as he answered the Dark Lord. "I'd like to be your son, sir!" He ran around the desk, laughing himself at the Dark Lord, hugging him tightly, before remembering himself. Flushing slightly, he looked up to see

the man peering down at him with amusement in his eyes, even as he felt arms tighten around him. Suddenly shy, he lowered his gaze and mumbled, "If you'll have me, that is..."

The man chuckled. A rich, throaty laugh that had Harry gazing up in surprise. He could count on one hand the number of times that Voldemort had laughed in the past month. "Would I have made the offer if I did not mean it, child?" Harry's only response was a bright smile.

After a few moments, the man disentangled himself from Harry with some hesitation that, if Harry didn't know better, he would have assumed was awkwardness. However, Dark Lords did not get awkward, so... "Child, do you have any questions about this?" Harry thought for a moment, then asked inquisitively, with his head cocked slightly to one side. "Will I have a new name, sir? And am I allowed to call you...father?" He ducked his head at the last sentence, peeking out from beneath dark bangs to gauge the reaction of the man who would be his new father.

The man smiled at him again, a smile that would have been strange on his lipless mouth were Harry not already used to the sight. "Yes, child, you are expected to address me as such, as well as to accept my authority over you as your father. And yes, I shall give you a new name. Harrison Maximus Riddle. A longer version of your current first name, so that you retain that much of your heritage at least. Maximus is the latin form of 'the greatest' – I have high expectations of my heir, child. As for the surname...well, you'll be taking my own. Unfortunately, I never had it magically changed, so that'll just have to do. Well child?"

"Harrison Maximus Riddle..." Harry mouthed, pleased with his new name. It sounded...important, somehow. Like that of a great person, whom Harry wished to be someday. Just like the man...his new father. Just then, a thought occurred to him. "Umm, sir...can I ask something?" He bit his lips hesitantly. At his new father's raised eyebrow, he continued, "Er, what do you mean by authority? Does it include...punishments?" The last was said with a whisper.

The man laid a finger beneath Harry's chin and tilted up his head so that their eyes met. "It means that you will respect me as your father...Harry, and obey me as such. While I will not demand from you unquestioning obedience, when I do ask for it, I expect to get it.

As for punishments...it would not be similar to the punishments you get from the Muggles – needless abuse for absolutely trivial reasons – but if you step out of line, you will be disciplined. And that does include corporal punishment. However Harry, I would never cause you any permanent damage, unless of course, you betray me."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief at that, even as he squirmed with the pleasure of hearing the man call him by his name for the first time. Smiling brightly, he replied, "I will never betray you...Father. I promise!" In response, the Dark Lord merely raised an eyebrow and gestured for him to continue. In a slightly graver manner, Harry continued softly, "I will always respect you, and I will try to obey you, Father...and if I fail, or break rules, or displease you, it's only fair that you punish me..." Harry maintained eye contact with his father as he said solemnly, " And if I ever betray you...I'd deserve to die."

Voldemort stared at the child with astonishment as he loudly proclaimed his loyalty. So earnest and honest...refreshingly so, in fact, when compared to how his Death Eaters used to act around him. He had read of Voldemort's exploits before, he knew that Voldemort was quite capable of torture and death. Yet he was still willing to give his trust to the Dark Lord, and to accept punishments wholeheartedly. Voldemort could only marvel at the boy even as he felt a faint stirring in his heart, a faint tug at his heartstrings that he had not experienced in a very long time...

He let none of it show of course. After all, he had the image of a Dark Lord to maintain, didn't he? "How very Gryffindorish of you, Harry. Such a hasty proclamation, have you forgotten your lessons so quickly?" He smiled to soften the rebuke, even as Harry flushed slightly. "Sorry...er...I mean, I apologise, Father." Harry's reply was meek, but the mirthful light in his eyes showed that he knew Voldemort was merely teasing him.

"Apology accepted, Harry. But I do expect you to work on reigning in your emotions, at least in public." At Harry's abashed nod, Voldemort continued, "Now, the magical blood adoption ritual I mentioned requires some preparation, but it can be done in two weeks time. During this time, I want you to think on the implications and consequences of becoming my heir, Harry. Once the ritual is done, there is no going back." He paused to allow his words to sink in before petting Harry's head lightly. "Think on my words, Harry. Good night."

Harry's answering smile was dazzling and his answering words were as sweet honey in Voldemort's ears. "Good night, Father."

Albus Dumbledore was not a happy man. Or wizard. Three weeks ago, he had discovered that the precious Boy-who-lived, the child who had caused the downfall of the Dark Lord, had vanished without a trace. It had been Petunia Dursley who had alerted him to the fact; the woman had written to say that her nephew had disappeared, and wanted to know if that meant that the payments for his upkeep would stop. Dumbledore had been alarmed; he had apparated to No.4 Privet Drive as soon as he could, to question the Dursleys discreetly. To his consternation, none of the Dursleys had known of what happened to Harry, apparently, he had just gone into the gardens one day and disappeared.

Dumbledore had cast diagnostic spells on the blood wards that surrounded the place: it was weakened and crumbling from the absence of one Harry Potter, but the fact that it was still there had ruled out one possibility - that Voldemort had somehow found himself a body again and had killed the child. Dumbledore had then wondered if it had other wizards of the Light, who misguidedly thought that Harry Potter should not be placed under the care of Muggles and had thus made off with him. Or if perhaps some remnants of the Death Eaters had kidnapped the boy for their own nefarious purposes. But no, no magic had been cast in the vicinity, or at least none that Dumbledore could detect. And Dumbledore was proud to say, modestly, that he was one of the most powerful wizards alive, and that no one alive could successfully hide their traces was him.

And so, Dumbledore was sorely perplexed, and quite annoyed too. When he had revealed the fact that Harry was missing to James Potter, James had broken down with guilt, and had taken to drinking, again. So much so that Dumbledore had decided that, for the greater good and the best interests of everyone, it would be kinder to siphon away some of the emotions that James felt towards the child. Not too much, of course, just enough to dull the guilt that must have hurt his favourite student so much.

After he had dealt with James, and a slightly distraught Samantha (that poor dear, having to deal with a grieving husband and a young child not her own!), Dumbledore had then cast locating spells to try

to find Harry Potter. Yet, it was as if Harry Potter had vanished from the face of the Earth - he could not be found anywhere. Yet, he was not dead either, the spell had revealed. A most puzzling situation indeed. One that Dumbledore decided he would keep under wraps until he had solved the puzzle. No, it would not do at all for the Wizarding World to learn that the precious Boy-who-lived, saviour of the Wizarding World, had gone missing under Dumbledore's care.

I do hope you'll forgive the manner in which I've portrayed Dumbledore, I just can't do it with any seriousness, for some reason. The thought of the mistakes that he've made in my story just leaves me laughing helplessly, hence, the rather ridiculous manner in which he carries himself...*cringes*

By the way, just a heads up. I'll be focusing on developing Harry as a character throughout his childhood and his student years - he won't be meeting James, Dumbledore or any Order of the Phoenix members anytime soon. This story will focus more on the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters, as well as said Death Eaters children.

Chapter Six: Lestranges

A month after the magical blood adoption ritual had been performed, a house-elf had informed Harry that his father required his presence in the study. Harry, who had been reading in the library, as was his wont, immediately put down "Ancient Runes Made Easy" and made his way to his father's study. As he walked, he made a mental note to ask his father for help with some of the runes; Harry found it a very interesting subject indeed and would liked to learn more about it. Plus, it had the advantage of being a branch of magic that Harry could learn a lot of without using magic. The Dark Lord had explained that Harry was not able to start on magical lessons yet, for his magical core had yet to mature enough to be fully stabilized; it was currently growing rapidly, like all children's core was wont to do. In another year, or so the Dark Lord had said, Harry's core's growth would have slowed to a more sedate pace, which was when he could begin using magic.

The Dark Lord had smirked and said that Harry was a fast developer, like he himself had been, for most children's core only stabilized enough when they were around eleven years of age. That was when they were sent to wizarding schools to learn the magical arts, but in Harry's case, the Dark Lord had determined that he could probably start learning the practical aspect of magic by the time he turned eight. His father had also informed him that any additional amount of power he might have gained as a result of the magical blood adoption ritual would have stabilized by that time.

Harry had been extremely pleased to learn that he would have an even stronger inheritance of his father's ability as a result of the ritual, in addition to the ones he had gained through the failed Killing curse. He was also elated when he found that he had taken on some of the physical characteristics of his father's appearance during his youth; his features were more refined and aristocratic, his hair was slightly tamer, and he had grown a full ten centimetres since the blood adoption ritual. In fact, Harry was so happy at the thought of it that he had to consciously fight to keep a grin from breaking out on his face.

Halting before the door of his father's study, Harry paused for a moment before knocking to school his expression into a bland, polite mask, as per the etiquette lessons his father had drummed into him. The Dark Lord tended to scowl when Harry turned up in his study

bouncing and exuberant, although he did not mind such behavior at other occasions. He told Harry that whenever he called him to the study, it was for serious matters of grave importance, hence Harry should be appropriately behaved at such times.

As the door swung open silently, Harry entered the study at a sedate pace, only to blink in surprise at the presence of three adult strangers who were kneeling in front his father. From what he could make out, two were male while the third was a female. Both of the males had long, matted dark brown hair, while the female had thick, curly black hair. Harry wondered if their posture meant that he would have to kneel too.

However, since his father was merely regarding him with slight amusement and had not made any indication either way, Harry settled for a respectful bow. "Good afternoon, Father." At his words, the three strangers looked up and glanced at him, with expressions of varying degrees of curiosity, shock and intrigue on their faces. Harry too, openly studied them. He noted that they appeared to be badly groomed, almost as if they had not been taking care of themselves. They all appeared to be in their thirties, with the female the youngest looking of them all. With her heavily lidded eyes and dark circles, she also seemed the most fatigued, whereas the males appeared to be merely tired. The younger of the two males had long hair while the older had short, shoulder-length hair.

Harry's observations however, were cut short by his father's voice. "Ah, Harry. How nice of you to join us. Come, let me introduce you to three of my devoted followers. Bellatrix, Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestranger." Harry brightened upon hearing that. Ah, so these are the Death Eaters that father mentioned. Bellatrix Lestranger, his protégé, her husband, and her husband's brother. Father said that they're very loyal to him, they suffered to search for him rather than plead innocence.

After hearing positive things about the trio, and looking at how haggard they had become in their search for the Dark Lord, Harry was predisposed to like them. "Nice to meet you, Mistfers Lestranger and Madam Lestranger!" He chirped cheerfully, remembering to be polite. His father gave him an amused glance. "There is no need to be so formal, Harry. You may address them by their first names. Bella, Rodolphus and Rabastan, this is my magically adopted heir and son – Harrison Maximus Riddle. I expect you to treat him with

the same respect you give to me. You may address him as young master." It was striking how differently the Dark Lord addressed the two. He was familiar, almost warm even, when speaking to Harry, however, when speaking to his followers, he was distant to the point of coolness.

The trio on the ground exchanged glances before the older male spoke up, "It is our pleasure to meet you, Young Master." Harry was slightly shocked at how respectful they were to him, a mere child of seven. All the time, his mind was whirling. Father said that his followers were more of a family to him than his parents ever were...so that means they are like my family too! After coming to that conclusion, Harry smiled and nodded. "Me too, Uncle Rodolphus, Aunt Bellatrix and Uncle Rabastan! But Aunt Bellatrix, are you feeling alright? You seem tired...er, sorry." He had noted with some concern that Bellatrix Lestrange seemed to be extremely fatigued and could not help but ask after her, after deciding that it was probably good to show concern to his new relatives. However, in the middle of his words, he had suddenly realized that maybe pointing out her tiredness wasn't the best thing to do, since his father absolutely hated weakness of any kind. Harry glanced at his father anxiously, hoping Bellatrix was not going to be punished for it – he hated it when others were punished because of him.

Harry had learnt of his father's dislike for weaknesses when he had showed it after a few weeks prior, when in a fit of self-pity and anger, lamenting the fact that James Potter had abandoned him, he had destroyed a marble statue of Salazar Slytherin, his father's ancestor. His father had eyed him coldly, then, in a burst of white light, sent a stinging hex his way, which had caused a bright red welt to appear on Harry's forearm. He had had to bite his lips to hold back a cry, as it was quite painful. Thereafter, he was made to kneel in the corner of his father's study for one hour. By the end of the hour, Harry's knees were bruised and sore and his back was aching from the stress the position had put him in. His father had then explained to Harry that self-pity was not acceptable and that Harry should learn to control his emotions better. Thus far, it had been the only time the Dark Lord had punished Harry.

Harry was rather surprised when the Dark Lord smiled in amusement. "Indeed. Well then since the most important points have already been covered, Harry, you may lead them to guestrooms Duodecim and Tredecim on the third level. Dismissed."

Harry remembered to give his father another bow before excitedly beckoning the trio to follow him.

Bellatrix Lestrange followed after the child with her mind in a state of turmoil. It had been a long day for her. First, she had felt her Dark Mark burn with a fiery that she had not felt in years, since before her Master's fall. Then, before she could properly rejoice in the fact that her Master had returned, her husband and brother-in-law's Mark had started to burn to. Together with the pulsing in the Mark, it meant that they had been summoned. Bellatrix and the other two had wasted no time in apparating to the Dark Lord's side.

She had stared in amazement when she appeared outside the gates of what seemed to be a huge manor. A house-elf had then led them to her Master's study, whereupon Bellatrix, upon laying eyes on the glorious form of her lord, had wasted no time falling to her knees and kissing the hem of her Master's robes, luxuriating in the dark power that her Master exuded. Her actions were soon followed by her husband and brother-in-law.

Bellatrix had then stared wide-eyed, breathless as her Master had seen fit to bestow upon them the story of his fall, and his subsequent return. I knew it! A fluke! That's all it was, a fluke due to the Mudblood's sacrifice. There's no way that Master could be defeated by a one-year-old baby! There's no way Master can be defeated ever! She had cackled slightly at that thought.

However, the Dark Lord had then turned his ire onto them, castigating them for not being more diligent in their search for him, and generally acting like a lost hen with no thought at all for furthering their cause. Bellatrix had screamed as the Cruciatus curse was cast on her. Pain, oh burning, glorious pain had caused her to truly feel the return of her lord and Master, for no other could wield the Cruciatus this adeptly.

After what should have been a few seconds but had felt like years to Bellatrix, the Dark Lord had changed the subject. He told them that he had plans for the upcoming war, plans to be put into action before his return was revealed to the world. "And one of these plans, my faithful followers, involves Harry James Potter. This is to be kept with the utmost secrecy." He had paused for a moment, regaling them with baleful glares, promising dire retribution if his orders were not followed. Bellatrix had of course, with all her heart, fervently

swore her obedience and loyalty. The Dark Lord had then continued, "I have taken the boy as my heir, in good faith. This means that you will all treat with the respect and deference that he deserves, and that you will not attempt to harm him or let any harm befall him. Is that understood?"

To say that Bellatrix was shocked was an understatement. In all her years of servitude, she had never once questioned her Master's actions, but this was almost enough to cause her to do so. Yet somehow, her faith in her Master held, and she chose to squash her doubts. After all, the Dark Lord was a genius, if he said that this was an appropriate course of action, then Bellatrix would believe him.

Yet, in her heart, she still held some small lingering resentment, at the fact that a mere boy, and the Potter brat at that, would be above her when it came to her Master's affections. She did not care about his supposed status, for Bellatrix did not care much about status, but only for her lord's affections. However, all that had soon been dispelled when the boy, thin, scrawny, yet with such adorable green eyes, had arrived in the study room and addressed her first with respect, then with familiarity.

Aunt Bellatrix...It was the first time she had heard herself addressed as such. Her maternal instinct, long since thought to be dead, arose with the full force of passion that she was capable of. And the concern he had shown her afterwards, together with his obvious intelligence, all of them served only to endear him to her.

Now as Bellatrix allowed herself to be led by the child, who had placed his hand in hers, her husband and brother-in-law exchanged bemused glances. Bellatrix ignored them in favour of listening to the child's speech. "...it's only Father and I here with Nagini, so I'm glad that you all came here. I'm lonely sometimes, 'cause Father is usually busy with his work." Just when Bellatrix found the beginnings of annoyance stir up in her at the boy's inane chatter, he stopped and peered up at Bellatrix shyly. "Sorry Aunt Bellatrix, I didn't mean to bother you with my chatter, I know you must be exhausted."

Bellatrix waved her hand carelessly. "Think nothing of it boy...Young Master. You may call me Bella." It was certainly preferable to how awful Aunt Bellatrix sounded. "Okay, Aunt Bella! And you can call me Harry." The child chirped with a huge smile, the very image of

childish exuberance. Bellatrix glared at the child suspiciously, wondering if the child was making fun of her.

Harry kept a straight face as he teased his father's protégé subtly. Upon closer observation, he had noted that this aunt of his seemed ill at ease with children. Hence his childish prattling and general manner of acting as childishly as possible. It was fun and Harry had not had the chance to indulge for quite some time. He noticed though, that his two Uncles were hiding snickers behind their hands, and concluded that he was not as subtle as he thought.

"So..." Rabastan cut in. Much as he was enjoying the situation, he thought he should defuse it before his sister-in-law realized that she was being toyed with. Bella had a fearsome temper when she was ired. "How long have you been staying here with the Dark Lord, Young Master?"

"Since my seventh birthday, Uncle Stan." Apparently, the child had mastered the art of answering without giving a true answer, Rabastan thought in amusement. For one, he did not even know how old the boy was – how was he to know when his birthday was? "Have you been searching for Father since his disappearance then?" The child countered with another question aimed to deflect attention. Someone has trained the child well indeed, Rabastan concluded.

Bellatrix, never one for the art of subtlety, immediately replied. "But of course! We had been searching tirelessly for the Dark Lord since the night that mudblood bitch tri—" Whatever else she was about to say was abruptly cut off by her husband's frantic shaking of his head, and the realization that she had just insulted the Dark Lord's heir's biological mother.

The child merely smiled as he shook his head slightly, "It's alright. It is a fact that my mother is a Mudblood, so I won't blame you for that. However, I do hope you'd refrain from other derogatory terms in my presence, since she is, for all her faults, the mother who sacrificed her life for me." Bellatrix could only nod slowly as she took in the sudden dangerous gleam that had come into the dark heir's eyes at the last statement, even as his expression remained politely calm.

"Of course, Young Master," Rodolphus murmured hurriedly. It seemed that the child was more than what he appeared to be

indeed. And perhaps, even worthy of being the dark heir, contrary to Rodolphus' initial assessment of the child.

"I'm sure we'll all get along fine then, Aunty Bella, Uncle Stan and Uncle Rody." The moment passed and the child was once more the young boy excited by the presence of unexpected guests.

At this point of time, Bellatrix has not seen her sister Narcissa and her family for six long years - hence, she never got to hear Draco address her as 'Aunt Bella'. And I'm going to explain Bellatrix's closeness to the Dark Lord as a result of the Dark Lord having personally trained her, as well as her harbouring an infatuation with him. But they probably were never lovers. Somehow, Voldemort just doesn't strike me as the type...

And yeah, Harry is rather mischievous in this chapter - he has changed after two and a half months under the Dark Lord's tutelage, no longer oppressed by the Dursleys. Though of course, he's trying to show proper manners and behaviour.

Chapter Seven: Reunion

"Candy! I want candy!" six-year-old Martin Potter shrieked at his step-mother. Samantha Potter gave a long suffering sigh. "Marty, I've already explained to you that you can't have candy until you finish your food." She looked down at the mess that Martin had made of his dinner. Did she really expect Martin to eat that? "On second thought..." she muttered as she clapped her hands twice.

A house-elf appeared, bowing deeply. It squeaked, "Pinky ready to serve Mistress." Samantha ordered, "Pinky, get the Young Master a new half-serving of dinner. And the Halloween candy." She added, relenting at the sight of Martin's begging puppy-dog eyes, which she was quite helpless to resist. Really, those eyes should be outlawed, she thought in amusement. Every time she tried to lay down the law, one begging look from those eyes and she melted. And with James busy with work, it was not like anyone could criticise her parenting methods...

Halloween. All Hallows Eve, Samhain. A few days prior, the Dark Lord had explained the traditions of wizarding Halloween to Harry as a day of remembrance for the dead. It also heralded darkness. A suitable night for Harry to mourn his dead mother, though he had little inclination to do so. And a suitable night for a gathering of Death Eaters.

Harry understood that his father was only going to call some of his inner-circle Death Eaters back to him tonight. A few were already living at the manor; Bellatrix, Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange, as well as Bartemius Crouch Junior. The latter, a young man in his late twenties with light-brown hair and fairly handsome features, had been brought to the manor merely a few days prior, weak, semi-addled and incoherent. Rabastan had later told Harry that Bartemius Jr.'s state was due to prolonged exposure to the Imperious Curse, placed on him by his own father.

Shocked, Harry had wondered how a father could be so cruel to his own son, when he had realized that his own biological father, James Potter, was no better. Thereafter, Harry could not help but feel a sense of kinship to Bartemius Jr., who, upon recovery of his faculty had insisted on being called Barty.

"You're my Master's son," Barty had rasped in a hoarse voice. "Call me Barty, like he does." Harry had agreed, whereupon Barty had graced him with a faint smile that lit up his previously grim expression. It was also thanks to Barty that Harry was in his current position now, hiding in a secret passage next to what Harry had come to call the throne room. When Barty had told him of the secret passage, Harry just knew that he would have to spy on his father's meeting tonight.

Peering out from a gap in the wall roughly the size and shape of a brick, Harry had a good view of the room. On his far left was a dais, upon which sat high-backed throne carved out of black marble. The floor was parquet, in dark, almost black tones, while the wall was covered with an old-fashioned, stately wall paper with dark green and black tones. Crystal chandeliers with black crystals hung from the ceiling, while a few tapestries, all in dark shades, hung on the walls. All in all, the atmosphere of the room was solemn, majestic and dark.

His father was already in the room, seated on the throne in a deceptively relaxed pose. In front of him, in an incomplete half semi-circle, knelt Harry's two uncles, his aunt and Barty, all garbed in their Death Eater attires of black hooded robes and a white mask. Then suddenly, the huge oak doors of the throne room swung open silently and two figures similarly clad entered the room. Harry stared at them curiously, wondering who they were. One was slightly taller than the other, who was more muscular and larger in size, even though nothing else of them could be made out.

Both figures kneeled when they were a few feet from the Dark Lord and crawled towards him before kissing the hems of his robes, all the while murmuring words like "my lord" and "master". While Harry could not actually hear the murmurs, he had a good idea of what was said, for he had heard his Aunty Bella and the others do the same many times. Idly, Harry wondered if, when the time came for him to join his father in meetings, he would have to do the same. While he found the idea to be slightly humiliating, he realized that he would not mind if the person whose robes he had to kiss was his father. After all, Harry reasoned, it would be a gesture of respect towards the most powerful and brilliant wizard alive.

"Morsmordre. Rise, my friends." The Dark Lord said lazily as he cast the Dark Mark. A skull with a snake protruding from its mouth

appeared in a hazy outline near the ceiling as Harry watched the six Death Eaters rose to their feet gracefully, wondering how they managed to achieve the feat when their knees must have hurt from kneeling on that hard wooden floor. "Luciusss, Evan, welcome back..." The Dark Lord hissed in sibilant tones. Harry shivered upon hearing his father's words – it was only when the Dark Lord was particularly angry that his words took on a tinge of parseltongue. From the slight stiffening of the two new Death Eaters, they knew the implications too.

Lucius Malfoy and Evan Rosier. Harry had heard of them from Uncle Rody. Lucius was supposedly the consummate politician and a very wealthy head of the Malfoy family, as well as an accomplished duelist, while Evan, having close working relationships with the leaders of many Dark creatures, was a particularly gifted negotiator and a skilled interrogator. It was no wonder then, that they were both in the Inner of Inner Circles, where membership was reserved for the most useful, skilled and loyal followers. Or so Uncle Rody had mentioned.

Though Harry had to wonder at their loyalty, given that the two had made no move to search for his father after his fall. It was apparent that the Dark Lord thought the same, for his voice was cold as he continued, "Yes, welcome back to my side, welcome...six long years...it has been such a long time, has it not? And yet here we are, reunited under the Dark Mark, as if no time has passed at all." No one dared to reply, not when the question had not been addressed to them, so the Dark Lord sneered before continuing, "Or are we? One has to wonder...what have my loyal followers have been busy with these past years...such that they did not even attempt to seek me out...hmm, Evan, Lucius?"

Harry flinched at the threat in his father's voice. Were he in the two Death Eaters' shoes, he would not have known what to say. The taller one however, appeared to be more adept at handling threatening questions, for he swiftly replied, "My Lord, I was constantly on the alert. Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me – "

"And yet you fled from the Dark Mark last year when dear Bella here sent it into the sky at the Quidditch World Cup." The Dark Lord had risen from his throne during the taller Death Eater's words and was

now towering over him in a majestic blaze of dark glory. "Master, I –" "Crucio..." The Dark Lord hissed, pointing his wand at the taller Death Eater, who immediately fell onto the floor twitching. For a few seconds, all he did was spasm in what must have been agony, but he soon gave in to screams.

Harry winced at the sight. While a clinical, detached part of his mind was marveling at the strong effects of the curse and idly wondering if he would be able to learn it, the more emotional half felt a jolt of fear. Was this what his father meant by corporal punishment? Would the Dark Lord use this on him? It was the first time Harry had seen the Dark Lord in his full glory, and Harry could only shiver at the power he felt rolling off the man.

Yet, Harry could not help but feel that the taller Death Eater deserved it, for he had not been fully loyal to the Dark Lord. Thus Harry came to the conclusion that if his father used it on him, he would have fully deserved it. He could live with that. Watching the taller Death Eater squirm however, seemed to appeal to some darker part of Harry, and he soon found himself savouring the sight, all the while wondering if there was some way he could cajole his father into doing that to Uncle Vernon...or teach him the curse so that he could do that to Uncle Vernon.

The Dark Lord released the man after a few moments. "Get up, Lucius...I expect more faithful service in the future." Malfoy stumbled to his feet with some difficulty, yet he still managed to bow low and gasp, "Yes, Master...you are merciful, thank you..." The Dark Lord ignored the man in favour of regarding Rosier with his full attention.

"Evan Rosier...do you have anything to say?" Rosier bowed his head before replying softly, "I was weak my Lord...I doubted, I feared..." Harry could only admire the man's courage; admitting weakness to the Dark Lord was tantamount to flirting with death. Everyone he spoke to had agreed on this point, even Aunt Bella and Barty, who were often at odds with each other. "In my cowardly fear, I fled to France, to wrangle myself a position in their Ministry, to build a contact of allies...But my Lord, if I had even the slightest hint of your whereabouts, I would have joined you immediately." Ah. Harry could see how the man had become known as an adept negotiator. While the Dark Lord disliked weaknesses, he hated dishonesty even more. Rosier was admitting to his fault of being weak, but at the same time, emphasizing his value to the Dark Lord.

Sure enough, the Dark Lord only held Rosier under the pain-causing curse for a few moments before he moved on to another subject matter. "All of you know of Ssseveruss Sssnape..." The Death Eaters shivered slightly at the hiss in the Dark Lord's voice. "He has not been called and you will not inform him of my return, nor even hint at it." At the murmurs of agreement from the Death Eaters, the Dark Lord then moved on to yet another issue.

Thereafter, Harry zoned out slightly as the Dark Lord discussed his plans with the Death Eaters. Or rather, the Dark Lord issued orders and gave explanations if he felt like it, while the Death Eaters obediently agreed. Harry vaguely heard the Dark Lord tell Malfoy to use his influence in the Ministry to clear Barty's and Rosier's name in Britain. He then gave Malfoy the task of spreading his influence in the Ministry, while Rosier was to quietly plant seeds of recruitment amongst the general wizarding population. Barty was to oversee his Imperiused father's movements, the Lestranges couple were to quietly recruit the Dementors of Azkaban, Uncle Rabastan was to subtly influence the Daily Prophet...

Harry only started to pay attention again when a trussed-up figure appeared in the middle of the throne room. "...six long years, we shall have a bit of fun before we begin work." The Dark Lord's vicious glee was evident in the tone of his voice. "This Muggle here," sneered the Dark Lord. "Decided to approach the abandoned Manor to try his luck at stealing whatever was left lying around...he did not believe in the rumours that the Manor was haunted...he was of course, soon thrown into the dungeons by the wards. He does not believe in magic...we will have to teach him the errors of his way then..." A cold laughter issued from the Dark Lord's throat as he waved his wand to vanish the ropes around the man before aiming another spell at the man.

As a jet of violet light hit the man, blood started to pour from all his orifices, including his eyes, ears and mouth. "Come, my faithful followers, join me in showing this Muggle the delights of magic." Harry felt a small twinge of pity for the Muggle, who was screaming loudly through his blood, but it was soon replaced by fascination as the Death Eaters stepped up to play.

"Silencio." Barty cast on the man, no doubt irritated by his screams. Harry saw his Aunt Bella scowl at Barty for a few seconds before

turning to the man. "Crucio," she sang sweetly, causing a jet of red light to hit the man, who begun to spasm and writhe in what must have been painful agony. Silently. Then Malfoy stepped up and made a slashing motion with his wand. Instantly, a deep slash appeared on the torso of the Muggle, like a sword wound. Harry watched avidly as the man twitched and clawed at the wooden floor.

A part of Harry knew that he should be horrified at the torture of the Muggle, if what his school teacher had said of torture was true, but in all honesty, Harry could not dredge up more than some small feelings of pity for the Muggle. After all, if torture was so wrong, then why had Uncle Vernon been allowed to beat him up time and again? His father's theory of survival of the fittest made more sense to Harry. And since Muggles were weak...

Harry watched quietly as the Death Eaters played with the wretched man. When they were finally done, the man did not remotely resemble a human. The Dark Lord soon put an end to his life with an "Avada Kedavra!" Harry's eyes widened as a bright green light shot from his father's wand. A flash, then the man was dead. Harry gasped and flinched. Was this how his father had tried to kill him when he was fifteen months old? Harry felt a frisson of fear creep up his spine at the thought. But no, his father would no longer attempt to kill him, he had promised Harry that. Even as adrenaline left him tingling, Harry forced himself to relax.

He watched as his father told Rosier to dispose of the corpse, then dismissed all his Death Eaters save one. "Barty, stay." Wondering what his father wanted Barty for, Harry watched as Barty remained and obediently waited for the other Death Eaters to file out of the room. Then the Dark Lord looked straight at the corner where Harry was hiding and hissed in Parseltongue, 'Open.'

As the piece of wall that Harry was hiding behind swung outwards silently, Harry gulped at being discovered. "Come here, Harry." The Dark Lord ordered neutrally. Gathering all the courage that he had inherited from two Gryffindor parents, Harry meekly made his way to stand before the Dark Lord. "Good evening Father," he greeted his father softly before ducking his head.

"What did I tell you about tonight, Harry?" His father asked him, a dangerous undertone evident in the sibilant voice. Harry winced slightly, "I was to stay in my room...because you were not ready for

Mister Malfoy and Mister Rosier to know of my existence." Harry hung his head as he realized how his childish impulsiveness could have thrown his father's plans awry.

"I apologize, Father." Harry told the floor guiltily. He heard the Dark Lord snort at that. "And how did you find out about that particular passage, son?" Harry closed his eyes at that question. Oh no...What was he to do? He did not wish to get Barty into trouble but neither did he wish to lie to his father, to the man who had been so nice to him since he had found him three months ago. "I...I don't want to say, Father," was the best that Harry could come up with.

For a moment, Harry thought that his father would be furious and that he would be the next one writhing on the floor from the red light of his father's wand. However, the Dark Lord merely shook his head slightly. "I see you do not want to get your co-conspirator into trouble. A noble attitude to have...then, I believe I shall ask the person himself. Barty, why did you inform Harry about the presence of the secret passage?"

Harry blinked as his father turned to Barty. He knew all along...how? Harry did not get an answer, however, he did get to see the very interesting sight of Bartemius Crouch Jr. flushing and fidgeting like a naughty school kid. "No answer? Shall I answer for you then, Barty? You were, despite how you tried to tell yourself otherwise, jealous of Harry. Jealous of his place as my son and heir. So you sought to get him into trouble – some harmless trouble, or so you told yourself. But where does the line gets drawn? Soon, your actions will escalate...and finally, eventually, you will cross the line."

All the blood seemed to drain from Barty's face when he heard the Dark Lord's words. Harry watched uncomfortably as Barty immediately dropped to the floor. "I sincerely apologize, Master...Please forgive me..." he whispered hoarsely. "Crucio." The Dark Lord snapped out, before laughing cruelly at the twitching man. "Barty, Barty, Barty. You should know that I do not forgive, nor do I forget." He held the curse for about ten seconds before releasing it and allowing Barty to draw himself to an upright kneeling position once more.

"Father." Harry kneeled and turned beseeching eyes on the Dark Lord. "Please be lenient. It was more my fault than Barty's – I was the one who chose to use the secret passage. And I'm sure Barty

has learnt his lesson. Please." The Dark Lord regarded his heir with narrowed eyes for a few moments before replying. "Very well, Harry, since you asked so nicely. Barty, you will stay in that position on that very spot until dawn and Harry...you will accompany him. Consider this your punishment." With that, the Dark Lord turned and strolled out of the room, his robes billowing gracefully behind him.

A few years into the future, Harry had looked back on the incident and wondered if the Dark Lord had intentionally and deliberately decided on that punishment knowing the likely consequences. For after a few moments of awkward silence, Barty and Harry had spent the night in a sincere conversation. By morning, Barty had rid himself of his unreasonable jealousy and Harry had gained himself the absolute loyalty of one of his father's Death Eater.

Right er...it occurred to me that some of you might be disturbed by Voldemort's sadism, but well, he's still the Dark Lord after all. I can't see him being all fluffy and nice...Don't worry, he won't be too harsh on Harry...

I'll attribute Harry's slight callousness to emotionally-stunted development caused by the abuse at the hands of the Dursleys. But Harry still has that innate ability to care for those he thinks of as family and friends...and he seems to have developed a case of mild hero-worship for the Dark Lord...*coughs*

As for how the Dark Lord knew that it was Barty who spoke to Harry about the secret passage, well, I leave to your guesses.

Chapter Eight: Lessons

A few days after Harry's eighth birthday, his father had told him that his magical core's growth rate had mostly stabilized; he was now allowed to begin practical magical lessons. Harry had been overjoyed. He had been learning mainly extremely theoretical subjects; History of Magic, taught by his Uncle Stan, who had somehow managed to make the lessons extremely interesting, Ancient Runes, taught by the Dark Lord himself on Monday and Friday nights, for none could surpass his mastery in that ancient art, and Arithmancy, taught by Uncle Rody. While Harry loved the first two subjects, he found the last torturous and privately labelled the two hour lessons every Wednesday afternoon with Uncle Rody the most boring two hours of every week.

Now, Harry could finally start doing magic. So as not to overtax his still-growing magical core and risk magical exhaustion, he was to start with lessons in Charms with Lucius Malfoy every Thursday nights for two hours. Thereafter, if his magic proved to show no sign of faltering, he could begin learning the basics of Dark Arts from his Aunt Bella, whom, as the Dark Lord's protégé, was trusted to show Harry the very basics. Eventually, or so the Dark Lord had told Harry, he was to learn Transfiguration as well, but that would be all that he would be taught before the start of his formal education.

Before the first of his new lessons, the Dark Lord had brought Harry to Diagon Alley to purchase his wand, under a heavy glamour. Ollivander, the wand-maker, had stared at his father for a long time before bustling off to select wands for Harry to try. After half-an-hour, Harry had finally found his wand; a eleven and a half inch holly wand with a phoenix feather as the core, a wand which Ollivander had pronounced the brother wand to the Dark Lord's. "Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember... I think we must expect great things from you, Mr Potter... After all, the Dark Lord did great things — terrible, yes, but great." Harry had had to try hard to suppress a snicker at his father's expression, which showed how badly the Dark Lord wanted to give the wand-maker first-hand experience of said great things, but alas, discretion had won out in the end.

By now, Harry had had a few lessons in Charms and there had apparently been no side-effects in his magical core. He did enjoy the lessons, though he was as yet unsure about the teacher...

As soon as Lucius Malfoy stepped into the room, he was drawn to the sight of the dark-haired boy sitting motionlessly at the desk, emerald green eyes glinting in the glow from the magical lights floating at even intervals near the ceiling, a half-smile playing about his lips. Harrison Maximus Riddle was an unusual child indeed, as Lucius had concluded after a few lessons with the boy. While most children his age would fidget easily, the dark heir tended towards absolute stillness and the eerie intensity in his eyes would easily cow the faint-hearted. Lucius however, prided himself on having the perfect mannerisms befitting of a pureblooded scion of the House of Malfoy all the time.

"Good afternoon, Young Master." Lucius inclined his upper body in a slight bow, carefully showing the correct amount of respect to an underage, unproven heir of his master. The boy nodded back seriously before stating in his childish, high voice. "You may begin, Mister Malfoy." Were it any other child, Lucius would have to try hard to suppress a smile at their presumptuous tone, but as it were, the commanding tones of the dark heir just seemed natural to Lucius.

"Of course, Young Master. Today we shall continue with the basics of Charms, followed by a start on Transfiguration." After seeing the little prince's astonishing pace of progress in Charms, Lucius had decided that he should also impart some knowledge of Transfiguration to the prince. Initially, when the Dark Lord had first ordered him to tutor the dark heir in the magical arts, Lucius had been resigned to agonizingly long hours of failure. After all, the child was merely eight! There was a reason why magical children were only sent to school at eleven, for that was when most came into enough magical potential to be taught. Still, he had resolved to start with the easier, more interesting subject of Charms, which contained less theory than other subjects. After three lessons with the child however, he had changed his stance. For such a young child to achieve the levitating charm on his third try was an unheard of feat; it would be a waste not to challenge this eerily mature child's mind instead.

Seeing a small smile light up the boy's eyes, Lucius knew his decision was correct. He sped through Charms more quickly than

usual, knowing that the boy would be able to stay with Lucius. By the time the boy had successfully cast a 'Scourgify' and an 'Alohomora', Lucius was beyond pleased and even more certain with his decision to start basic Transfiguration.

"Very good, Young Master. You have mastered two basic charms in the span of an hour. I believe you are now ready to move on to a new subject?" Lucius was careful to phrase it as a question. While he was the teacher now, he was of no doubt that the young heir was the one in charge here. After all, he held all the power; a simple comment to the Dark Lord and Lucius could be made to suffer. The Dark Lord had been quite clear that Lucius was to treat Harrison with the utmost respect at all times.

"Of course, Mister Malfoy. You may proceed." Despite his attempt to sound aloof, the boy's excitement was obvious if one but looked in his eyes. Lucius allowed a small smile to twitch on his lips as he resolved to teach the child the Malfoy art of maintaining a mask on one's face at all times. Perhaps at a later date. Currently however, he had a Transfiguration class to teach.

After spending half an hour expounding on the basic theory of transfiguration, Lucius indicated for the child to attempt the most basic of transfiguration; turning a match stick into a needle. He watched as the boy narrowed his Avada Kedavra green eyes in concentration, before determinedly pointing his wand at the matchstick. If not for the child's already remarkable results at Charms, Lucius would have gaped in disbelief at the silvery rod that resulted. True, it wasn't really a true needle, the tip not being nearly narrow enough, but it was still an accomplishment for a first attempt. Lucius was not wont to give a full praise however, for anything less than perfection. "While it was a good attempt, Young Master, you would do well to concentrate harder on the visualization..." A couple of lessons prior, Lucius might have been hesitant about outright criticizing the dark heir, but by now, he knew that the child was willing to accept correction when he did make a mistake.

The boy nodded before trying again. This time, he managed a perfect transfiguration; the matchstick became both silver and pointy, and even lengthened to the size of a proper needle. Lucius inclined his head slightly and allowed a smile to grace his lips. "Very nice, Young Master." When the boy returned a small smile, Lucius could not help but feel a sense of satisfaction. When he had been ordered

to teach the child, he had initially deemed it a waste of his precious time, time which he could have spent on politicians and other important figures, on spreading his intricate web through the Ministry. However, one did not say no to the Dark Lord unless said person had a death wish, so Lucius had resigned himself to the chore. By now however, Lucius was starting to take pride in the teaching and in his prodigious student.

A few lessons later, Lucius had been unable to continue with teaching Transfiguration, as he did have a busy schedule, so the Dark Lord consented to allow Barty to do so instead. Harry enjoyed these lessons even more than when it had been Lucius who was the teacher, for Barty was younger, less stuffy and much more fun.

"Young Master, can you transfigure this porcupine into a pincushion?" Barty taught by challenging Harry to do his best and beyond. Never one to back down from a challenge, Harry merely nodded determinedly. When he finally succeeded in his task, he smirked at Barty in triumph, whereupon Barty had no choice but to concede that Harry had been successful.

Barty was even more fun when he was not in teacher mode. Harry spent some afternoons exploring the Manor grounds with Barty, on foot and sometimes even on broomsticks. To his surprise and slight consternation, he had found out that he was a natural at flying when he had first got onto a broom and managed to perform a loop in the air, a feat that had almost given Barty a heart attack (who later confessed that he had been wondering morbidly what the Dark Lord would do to him if Harry had been found on the ground with a mangled body). Apparently, flying was a talent which he had inherited from his biological father. "It's probably the only thing I would ever inherit from him," Harry had sneered. "Considering that I am no longer one of them." Barty had smiled at Harry, before replying, "You're the Dark Heir now, Young Master, isn't that a much better inheritance?"

Harry had returned Barty's smile before nodding in agreement.

The last new lesson that Harry would be having was the Dark Arts, to be taught by his Aunt Bella. Truth be told, Harry was the most excited about this particular lesson, since he had been told heavily influenced by his Dark Lord father to be biased towards the Dark Arts.

Having completed his assigned readings for the class, Harry arrived punctually at the training room, which had been designated as the classroom for this particular lesson of his. Bellatrix, dressed in a form-fitting black dress, was already waiting for him with her wand at the ready. "So, ickle Harrison, are you ready for your first ever Dark Arts lesson?" She cackled slightly at her own words, before pointing her wand at Harry and casting a curse at him. After identifying the curse as the leg-locker curse by its sickly pale yellow light, Harry dodged the jinx by jumping out of the way.

"Come on, little Harrison, you've got to do better than that!" She sang in a poisonously sweet voice as she aimed yet another curse at Harry. Scowling slightly, Harry had tried to return the curse. "Locomotor mortis!" He yelled, pointing the wand at Bellatrix, but to no avail. "Visualize little Harrison, and wave your wand like this!" She cast the curse again, this time successfully locking Harry's legs together. With his legs bound, Harry tripped and fell face first onto the hard wooden floor, bruising his left cheek in the process.

He watched as with another wave of the wand, Bellatrix cancelled the spell. "Get up, ickle Harrikins, and try again." Harry narrowed his eyes, slightly irritated by diminutive nicknames she had come up for him. Over the months, Bellatrix had become somewhat of a mother to him, who had never had one before – she often brought him packets of sweets and chocolates from her outside trips (often heavily disguised under glamours, for she was still a wanted criminal), fussed over him as much as her nature would allow, and generally coddled him. But Harry drew the line at the childish nicknames.

With a sweet smile, Harry replied, "Very well, Auntie Bel – Locomotor Mortis!" Stopping in mid-sentence, Harry cast the curse at Bellatrix successfully and even managed to catch her off guard; her legs locked together and she had started to fall towards the floor before she hastily waved her wand to cancel the spell.

"Very nice, Harrison! A trick worthy of a Slytherin." Bellatrix purred and gave Harry a genuine smile before she continued, "No need to shout, dear Harrison, as the power of the spell lies not in the volume but in the visualization and concentration of the caster." Harry nodded slightly sheepishly. "I knew that but I forgot. It's not a good idea to shout out spells loudly right, Auntie Bella?"

Bellatrix laughed at that. "Now you're learning, Harrison. Shouting them loudly lets your enemy know what you're going to use. Which they can then stop with a shield. Protego." She demonstrated with a swish of her wand, conjuring up a semi-translucent sphere the size of a beach ball in front of her. "It's size is determined by the power of the spell. This is fairly difficult, some of those imbeciles at the Ministry can't do it." She motioned for Harry to try out the spell.

Unfortunately for Harry, Bellatrix was correct in her assessment of its difficulty level. Try as he might, Harry could not even make a small vaporous shield appear. Bellatrix cackled in amusement at Harry's disappointed face, "Now, now ickle Harrison, I would have been astonished if you could do such a high-level spell on your first day!" She told Harry to practise it in his free time, before moving on to the counter-curse of the leg locker curse and another three hexes; the sneezing hex Steleus, the knee-reversal hex and the skull-enlarging hex Engorgio Skullus. Bellatrix had explained that these three hexes were pretty basic, and had the effect of distracting the opponent during a duel. One could not, after all, utter spells while sneezing uncontrollably, neither can the person dodge with knees on the wrong side of his legs nor keep his balance with an enlarged head.

Then, with gleeful laughter, Bellatrix had started a 'practise' match with Harry. After the initial rounds of him falling onto the ground while Bellatrix remained untouched, Harry had finally managed to get in one or two hexes before he was once again cursed. By the end of the two hour lesson with Bellatrix, Harry was bruised all over. Before he left, Bellatrix handed Harry a jar of bruise removal paste before petting him lightly on the head. "You were quite good for a beginner, Harrison. Don't be too disheartened; I have decades of experience over you."

When he finally left the room, Harry resolved to learn a few new hexes by his next lesson. I will make sure Aunt Bella doesn't know what hit her, he vowed determinedly, with a childish scowl on his face as he headed straight to the library and to the book he had seen on a certain shelf...Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed...oh yes, he would make sure to surprise his aunt in the next lesson.

Perhaps the lesson that Harry loved most, if only because of the fact it was one of the few times he could have the undivided attention of

his father, Ancient Runes was delightfully fascinating to eight-year-old Harry, even if it was mostly theoretical at the beginner's level. However, the Dark Lord had informed Harry that once he had developed a certain level of proficiency in the runes, runes could be used with many ritual magic, in both defence and offence.

"Were it not for runes, my son, my physical body would have been destroyed that night." The Dark Lord had had a faraway look in his crimson eyes when he told Harry that during one of their lessons. Harry had known not to pry; his father hated being reminded of the night of his fall. After a few minutes, the Dark Lord had continued, "Runes, Harry, can be used in many ways. Notwithstanding the neutral use of warding, it is extremely useful in many branches of the Dark Arts, including the summoning of creatures, the laying of long-lasting curses, the entrapment of your enemies' body and even mind...Its limit lays only in your knowledge and imagination.

"Now, tell me how you would use these five runes to create a lasting headache for your enemies." Harry had set to work quickly, not wishing to disappoint his father. The Dark Lord was a strict, bothering on harsh, but patient teacher. He would never tell Harry the correct answer – if Harry did it wrongly the first time, he had to try again and again until he got the right shape of the rune or configuration of runes.

Once, early on in their lessons, Harry had given up in frustration after trying over twenty combinations to no avail. The Dark Lord had cast a non-verbal Aguamenti Charm on his son, resulting in a thoroughly drenched Harry, before coolly informing him to cool down and to try again. Once Harry had swallowed his shame and anger, he had apologised and attempted the task once more, finally getting it correct.

Indeed, if there was one thing Harry learnt, it was that lessons with the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters were never boring.

"My lord," Lucius knelt respectfully before the Dark Lord as he gave his report in the deserted throne room. When he was younger, he never thought that he would be willingly subservient to anyone, but the Dark Lord was powerful, and Malfoys had always been drawn to power. He found that as long as he could remain as a powerful figure in his own right, he did not mind bowing down to the Dark Lord.

"It has been done as you have ordered – Dumbledore has been stripped of his position as the Chief Warlock of Wizengamot, though he retains a seat, when Ministry investigation showed that the Boy-who-lived is missing, and has been so for the past year." Lucius reported blandly, his aristocratic mask hiding his delight at his accomplishment.

The Dark Lord laughed coldly upon hearing the news. "Well done, my friend. Dumbledore needed to be taught a lesson. It was long overdue – the old fool has hidden behind his reputation long enough." Drumming his fingers slightly on the throne, he appeared to be thinking deeply. "What of James Potter?"

Here, Lucius allowed a small smile to spoil his aristocratic mask. "Due to the public backlash from the exposé, Potter is likely to resign from his position as Head Auror. The post will likely go to Black." The Dark Lord appeared to be pleased at the news as he ruminated on the issue further. "Excellent. Now, Lucius, tell me how goes my heir's lessons..." Changing the subject suddenly, the Dark Lord moved on to another topic that he deemed important...

Can you see the small change? Harry's personality will change subtly throughout the years, as he grows up. And Voldemort's influence on him will, hopefully, be visible. I hoped you all liked my version of Harry!

Chapter Nine: Followers

Papers. Documents. And more papers. Sirius Orion Black groaned as he half-heartedly flipped through the pile of papers in his office. Maybe I'll pass these off to Shacklebolt...He'll get it done in half the time I'd take! Had he known of that being Head of the Auror Office included being a paper-pusher, he would have refused the job when it had been offered to him. But then, James had urged him to take it upon his resignation, so he had agreed to do without hesitation. Even if he had been so very furious with James at that point in time, for his friend's part in the disappearance of his godson, such that good old Moony had to act as a peace-maker.

Three years later, Sirius still wondered how his best friend could have been so careless with his older son. Even if Dumbledore had been the one who insisted that Harry was safe, Sirius was still incredulous as to how James had let Harry live apart from him for six years, without even once checking on him...it was apparent that Lily's death had hit him harder than even Sirius had thought. Every so frequently, Sirius would mourn for the little toddler that he had known, wondering if the playfully curious little Harry was still alive somewhere. Ah, Harry. It was at these moments that Sirius would feel a renewed surge of anger at his best friend...as for the old Headmaster, Sirius was not sure if his anger at him ever faded completely...

Time flies... Bartemius Crouch Junior thought whimsically as he observed the two young boys playing in the grounds of the manor, racing each other on the newest brooms available in the market. He watched as the dark-haired boy suddenly did an abrupt U-turn and dived straight at the blond haired boy, who immediately froze in place. When the dark-haired boy was a few inches from the blond, he laughed and veered off to the right.

Barty shook his head slightly in amusement. The young master had a sadistic sense of humour at times, a trait which Barty privately thought to be 'inherited' from the Dark Lord. He rather pitied the Malfoy heir at times actually, for having to endure the dark heir's sense of humour regularly.

A few years ago, the young master had politely requested his father the Dark Lord to provide him with some childhood playmates, which had prompted the introduction of a few of the pureblood children of

Death-Eaters, including Malfoy's son Draco, Nott's son Theodore, Greengrass' daughter Daphne, Parkinson's daughter Pansy, Crabbe's son Vincent, Goyle's son Gregory, Mulciber's son Aleron and Macnair's son Silas. While most of them were of the same age as the dark heir, the latter two were both second-year students in Durmstrang.

Of all the children, Barty had privately observed that the young master seemed to be closest to the Malfoy heir, followed closely by Mulciber, which Barty considered most strange, considering the latter was two years older. And Barty knew that at that age, a gap of even two years was sometimes considered insurmountable.

Aleron Fidel Mulciber watched the dark heir and Draco race each other around the sky contentedly. He was currently lying on the grass beside his friend, Silas Curtis Macnair, relaxing after a morning spent playing with the two younger children. "I feel old at times, Silas."

His friend looked at him, a lopsided grin softening his sharp features, mischief in his brown eyes. "At this age? Then my dear Aleron, I look forward to seeing your reactions when we're as old as ol' Barty Crouch." Aleron scoffed slightly, even as mirth lit up his dark blue eyes. "Don't let him catch you call him that, he'd skin you alive."

Silas shrugged as best as he was able to while lying on the grass, "Harrison calls him that. And he usually laughs it off." Aleron sat up and shook his head at his friend's naiveté, sending his dark tresses flying in the wind. "The young master, my friend, is the dark heir; he could call Barty whatever he wanted and Barty would just smile and take it."

Silas raised an eyebrow. "I've always wondered – why do you call him that, Aleron? He gave us permission to address him by Harrison months ago." Aleron was silent for a moment, then he smiled slyly. "If you want to know the story, let me copy your Astronomy homework." Silas narrowed his eyes before shrugging. "Done. But it had better be a good story."

Aleron inclined his head slightly. "Well. Last summer, when we were playing near the forest, I sort of wandered away from the group. You remember?" Silas frowned and nodded once. "Yeah. You were sick that day, yet you still insisted on coming out with us to play." Aleron

wincing slightly. "Well, I was a foolish brat then. I was feeling really terrible, and I guess I zoned for a couple of seconds. When I came to, I was alone in some part of the forest where I had never been to before – totally lost."

Silas nodded thoughtfully. "Uh-huh. I remember. We all panicked when we realized you had disappeared. We weren't supposed to be playing so near to the forest, Barty always said that it was dangerous. Harrison sent us back to the manor with Draco and Theo, he told me to get Barty. By the time Barty and I reached the forest though, you had already been rescued by Harrison."

Aleron nodded, his eyes taking on a faraway look. "Yeah, Young Master saved me. And I do mean that literally Silas. When I came to, there was a huge snake in front of me, at least six feet long. I recognize the species – it's a really poisonous viper. If it had bitten me, I would have been dead within three seconds. And it was on the verge of doing so, it was towering over me when Young Master appeared."

Glancing at Silas, he noted that he had his friend's full attention. "He revealed to everyone that he could speak Parseltongue last week remember?" At Silas' nod, Aleron continued, "He spoke to the snake in soft hisses. The snake backed away, Silas, it backed away and it actually bowed to Young Master before disappearing into the forest. Then Young Master levitated me out of the forest."

At Silas' look of stunned astonishment, Aleron smiled wryly. "He saved my life, Silas. I owe him a wizard's life debt. And his personality...his power...I have decided, Silas, when he comes into his own, I'm going to be his loyal follower."

Silas did not reply for a long moment. When he finally responded, it was with a move that Aleron did not expect; he punched Aleron's shoulder, hard. "Oww." Aleron glared at his friend. "What's that for?"

"Not telling me about the incident, of course." Silas retorted. Aleron shook his head. "I couldn't. He did not want to reveal his Parseltongue ability then, so I promised to keep it secret until he told everyone about that ability."

Silas nodded. "Ok, I understand." He was silent for a moment as he pondered the implications of his friend's revelation. "So you'd be

watching out for him when school starts then?" Giving his friend an odd look, Aleron laughed lightly. "Silas, the young master does not need to be watched out for. I'll be serving him when he attends Durmstrang this fall."

Pausing slightly, Aleron regarded his friend for a moment before asking in a serious manner, "Silas my friend, will you join me? In serving the young master?" Silas nodded slowly in response to his friend's question. Though Aleron could be serious and all too mature at times, never had Silas seen his friend so grave. "I've been Harrison's companion for as long as you have, Aleron. And yes, I'll join you."

Aleron smiled, glad that he had gained a new follower for his chosen master. Though he could tell that Silas' heart was not wholeheartedly devoted to Harrison Maximus Riddle as yet, Aleron knew that with time, he would be drawn in by the young master's power and charisma.

Said young master was currently enjoying himself in the air. With loops, feints, barrel-rolls and other techniques, Harrison Maximus Riddle truly enjoyed flying, though he did not really feel the same way about Quidditch. After the dive which had nearly scared Draco off his broom, Harry flew past Draco before shouting to his friend, "Hey Draco, come on, try to catch me!" Smirking, he sped away to the muttered curses of his friend.

Harry quite enjoyed teasing the Malfoy heir in private, though he was often careful to allow Draco to maintain his perfect arrogant mask in public. He knew that the Malfoys prided themselves on that and Harry could certainly not fault that, seeing as how he too, at the behest of his father, had learnt to act the same way. Though not without inserting his own brand of sardonic quirks, Harry was often the epitome of cool and well-bred politeness the few times he was away from the Manor.

In a way, he and Draco were alike. Both idolized their father to a certain extent and would rather suffer through a Slug-burping curse than to disappoint them, both had to live up to the pressures of being heirs to lofty positions, and both were intelligent and cunning enough, though Harry prided himself on being the better of the two. He would miss Draco, he could admit, if only to himself, when they finally started formal schooling come fall. While Draco would be

going to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry would be leaving for Durmstrang Institute.

Harry recalled the conversation he had with his father over his decision:

"Father, may I know why you're sending me to Durmstrang instead of Hogwarts?" Harry had been rather curious. With all the Dark Lord had had him read on Hogwarts, Harry had fully expected to be sent there. The Dark Lord had frowned slightly, "There are many reasons, Harry. First of all, Hogwarts is where the old fool currently resides. While your Occlumency skills have progressed enough to be able to shield against an overt mental probe, it is not at the stage where you're able to hide the fact that you have been learning the art. Dumbledore would get suspicious, especially since you have my last name. Furthermore, James Potter, fool that he is, is going to be teaching at Hogwarts as the teacher of the Dueling elective, a new elective Dumbledore has no doubt created to recruit students for his precious Order."

Harry had nodded thoughtfully at that. "I understand, Father. That's also the reason why you allowed Karkaroff to remain in your service right? Because he's the Highmaster of Durmstrang, the school's as safe as can be."

"Correct. That is the only reason," the Dark Lord sneered. "That I had not terminated him immediately for his cowardice." Harry had smiled at that. Luckily for Igor Karkaroff, he had only revealed the names of common Death Eaters to the Ministry, and none of those in the Inner Circle. Or nothing would be able to save him from the Dark Lord's wrath when the Dark Lord had finally called all of his Death Eaters back to him the previous Halloween.

"In addition, Durmstrang's curriculum is broader than Hogwarts – its students and faculty also takes a more liberal view of the Dark Arts. You would not have to hide most of your talents there, Harry. And I fully expect you to use this opportunity well to befriend your fellow schoolmates."

Finally fully convinced of his father's reasoning and marveling at the thought that had gone into the decision, Harry had bowed slightly. "I will not disappoint you, Father."

The day before Harry was to leave for Durmstrang and Draco, Theodore and the other children for Hogwarts, Harry met his two closest friends for the last time in what was going to be a long while (at least to them).

All of them were seated; Harry on his bed and his friends in chairs facing him. "Draco, Theo," Harry had started with an unusually serious air. Draco and Theodore had exchanged glances before giving Harry their full attention. "I fully expect you two to be my hands at Hogwarts. Draco, even though I cannot be there personally, I hope you can help me, and by extension my father, gain followers there. Start with your yearmates in your house for now. And Draco, I know you have to keep up appearances, but do try not to alienate too many people."

Draco had inclined his head in a respectful nod. Smart and already aware of the subtle arts of politics, he knew it when Harry was in his dark heir persona. And having seen firsthand of what Harry could do, he was more than convinced of Harry's ability to lead, and hence, had chosen to follow him willingly. Even if his father had not instructed him to obey Harry, Draco knew that he would have done so on his own.

"Good. I know I can count on you." Harry's smile was affectionate as he allowed his true feelings for his friend to shine through his mask. "Theo," Harry addressed the other boy with a slight frown. "I know you're solitary by nature. But in this, I expect you to give Draco your full support." Theodore returned Harry's gaze silently for a few seconds, before suddenly smiling. "Harrison, I don't usually do 'groups' well. I'm not much of a leader, neither do I usually follow. But," Here, Theodore glanced at Draco, then back at Harry. "With you as the leader, I find I don't mind. And since Draco is your second, I will follow him as well." Harry returned Theodore's smile with one of his own, before lounging back on his pillows.

"Have fun at Hogwarts, you guys. Tell Pansy, Vince and Greg hi from me. And give James Potter hell." Draco and Theo both smirked at that. "Oh, I'll be sure to pass on your greetings to your dear daddy, Harrison," Draco drawled. Harry scowled. Since the two had started Occlumency at roughly the same time as Harry, Harry had decided to trust them with the fact that he had been Harry James Potter about a month ago, much to the disapproval of the Dark Lord (who had wanted to keep it a secret from all but his most trusted Death

Eaters in the Inner of the Inner Circle). Since then, they had not stopped teasing him about it, though Harry supposed it was a better reaction than what he had expected.

So Harry decided to throw a pillow at Draco. A surprise 'oomph' issued from his face, even as Theodore laughed. A moment later, it was his turn to cry out as another pillow landed on him. And so, the last day of the three boys' idyllic childhood was spent in a pillow-fight in Harry's room.

10 a.m. in the morning. After a hasty breakfast, Harry had put his shrunken trunk and shrunken fur hat into his pockets before dressing hastily in the white collared shirt with a red-and-black striped tie and the blood-red robes edged with black at the collar and hem that made up Durmstrang's uniform. He had slipped the black leather gloves into his pocket before fastening the black belt with a satisfied air, examining the plain silver buckle with interest – Aleron had told him that a symbol would appear there after his first month, depending on...Harry's lips curled into a smirk. After surveying himself somewhat critically in the mirror, he decided that with the strong glamour that concealed the lightning bolt scar on his forehead and the features that the magical blood adoption ritual had given him, there was no way he could be recognized as the Boy-who-lived unless one squinted really hard.

Carrying his fur-lined cloak in his arm, he had slid his wand into the wand hostler that had been his eleventh birthday present from Bellatrix, before bidding all the Death Eaters living in the manor goodbye, save for Bellatrix, who would be accompanying the Dark Lord and Harry to Swansea port.

Grabbing his father's arm, Harry smiled up at his father's heavily glamourised form, which resembled a blend of Lucius Malfoy and Barty's appearance. "Ready?" The Dark Lord asked quietly. At Harry's nod, the Dark Lord apparated them to the apparition point at Swansea port.

Blinking, Harry opened his eyes to what seemed like a typical ferry terminal, which was already full of school children, all dressed in blood-red robes. Harry spotted a fireplace a few hundred yards away – there were apparently two methods to get to the port; by apparation or by the Floo network. Even if Muggle-borns were allowed to study at Durmstrang, they wouldn't be able to get in here.

He followed his father to a secluded corner by a pillar, waiting for Bellatrix to join them, which she did moments later.

"Ah, just look at my ickle little Harrison. All grown-up now and ready to go to school!" Bellatrix, also heavily glamoured, cackled delightedly before reaching out to envelope Harry in a tight hug. After teaching Harry the basics of the Dark Arts for a few years, much of Bellatrix's slight insanity due to Dark Arts addiction had been cured through a better understanding of how to wield it, though she still liked to act otherwise. "Take care of yourself," she mumbled softly.

"Don't miss me too much, Auntie Bella," Harry whispered cheekily into his surrogate mother's ear. Upon being released from the tight stranglehold Bellatrix had on him, he inclined his head in a slight bow to the Dark Lord, who said neutrally, "I wish you all the best in your endeavours, my son." Harry smiled at the last. "The same to you, Father. Good bye."

To anyone else who might be looking, Harry was sure that his strange family would go unnoticed in the crowd. A couple bidding farewell to their son. The extremely enthusiastic mother and cold, aloof father – all understandable, stereotypical images of parents that could be easily explained. With a last look at his Dark Lord of an adoptive father and loyal Death Eater of a surrogate mother, Harry headed to board the Durmstrang ship moored at the lone berth.

With tall masts, many oars, a blood red finishing and the crest of Durmstrang Institute on its sails, Harry could not help but gaze upon the majestic ship with awe. He made sure to let none of it show on his face however, as he crossed the wooden plank and boarded the ship. "Harrison, Harrison!" A cry of joy in a high-pitched voice prompted him to turn around. A girl with long, golden blonde hair, bluish-grey eyes and a pretty face beamed at him as she boarded the ship.

"Ah, Daphne. It's a pleasure to see you again." Harry inclined his head politely and extended his hand, a warning gleam in his eyes. Daphne Persephone Greengrass blushed for a few seconds before collecting herself and acting like the pure-blooded lady she was to become. "Yes indeed. It has been quite a while. Shall we find a cabin so that we can catch up then, Harrison?" Harrison nodded before extending his arm to her. As Daphne smiled sweetly and slid

her hands into the loop that his arm made, onlookers on the ship could not help but marvel at the perfect manners of the two first-years.

When the door had closed behind them, Harry and Daphne found themselves in an wooden cabin with comfortably padded wooden benches. Laying his fur cloak down, Harry regarded Daphne silently for a few seconds. "Merlin, Harrison, it is good to see you again!" Daphne finally said. Harry returned her smile this time and drew her into a quick hug. Pulling her to sit down with him, he replied with a laugh, "Yes, Daphne, I missed you too. But that doesn't mean you should forget everything you've learnt in etiquette lessons!"

Daphne blushed again. "Sorry about that, I was just too excited. I haven't seen you at all this summer, all because my parents suddenly decided that I absolutely had to go on a holiday with them in France!" Harry laughed at that. He knew that Daphne's father had received a mission from the Dark Lord that necessitated his presence in France, and that bringing his family along for a holiday was the perfect cover. Daphne however, did not know that and Harry saw no reason to enlighten her.

"So how was France? And how's little Astoria?" Harry questioned, recalling that Daphne had a younger sister. Daphne took that as her cue, and before long, she was chattering away at lightning speed.

When a polite knock on the door stopped her two hours later, Harry was more than ready for some distraction. While Daphne was a nice enough person, she tended to talk much more than was necessary. "Come in," Harry called. The door opened to admit the two other students that Harry knew from Durmstrang: Aleron and Silas.

As the door closed with a snick, Aleron bowed to Harry. "Young Master," he greeted respectfully. "Harrison," Silas' greeting was no less respectful, if slightly forced. Harry inclined his head slightly. "Aleron, you have to address me by my name in public. At least for now." He ended with a small smirk.

Aleron nodded. "I know, Young Master." Harry's smirk grew even more pronounced as he basked in the older teen's subservience. "Come, I have a little something for you two." Passing the teens two black, thin, wristbands with a small green serpent design, Harry continued, "Wear it next to your skin. It'll burn slightly when I change

the details on my band, and the time and place will appear on your bands. It's been spelled so that only you will see the writing." Harry showed them his own version of the wristband, slightly thicker and more elaborate, with a silver serpent instead. Aleron and Silas nodded, then immediately put on the band.

"Can I have one too, Harrison?" Daphne asked curiously. Harry regarded Daphne silently before explaining patiently, "Daphne, this is not a trinket. It's for my followers, or rather, my future followers, those who have pledged to serve me."

"A mark of their loyalty, just like the Dark Mark. I know." Daphne smiled as Harry widened his eyes slightly for a moment before regaining his composure. "You're my friend, Harrison. I am willing to follow you...at least while we're still students." She added the last with a small laugh. Harry laughed too, and handed her a wristband. "Very well, Daphne. I'll accept your pledge, however temporary it may be."

If any of you are interested in viewing a sketch of the Durmstrang Institute uniforms used in this story, just click on the links on my profile page. There are also sketches of some of the students that'll appear in this chapter and the next. Just remember that I'm not an artist, so please, don't blame me if it isn't up to your standards!

Chapter Ten: Durmstrang Year One Part I

Soon enough, a bell chime signaled the arrival of the ship at Durmstrang. Pulling himself from the tiny window that the cabin boasted, where Harry had spent the last hour observing first the underwater life, and later the mountain scenery of Durmstrang, Harry draped his black fur cloak over his shoulders. No longer thin and malnourished like he had been at the Dursleys, Harry was nevertheless still relatively short at just barely shy of five feet, though he had filled out some. In fact, Daphne was slightly taller than him, a fact which he could not help but feel annoyed at.

However, when they had exited the ship and gotten their first look at the castle just in front of the lake, Harry soon forgot his irritation. The castle was...breath-taking. Huge and sprawling, the main wing consisted of four stories, while the two towers that Harry could see both had seven floors. Dark granite formed the exterior of the castle, and the roof were tiled with black. Situated in the middle of the valley, the castle was framed on both sides by forests, thick and dark. All in all, it gave off a slightly forbidding, and dark aura.

Together with Daphne and the other first years, Harry followed the prefect, one Xavier Deverill, into the school. As he walked, he heard some of the other first-years around him chattering excitedly.

"...start school at last, so excited!" A pert-faced brunette giggled to her friend.

"Wonder when we'll get our timetable..." a cherub-faced boy with long auburn hair pulled back into a bouncy ponytail walking beside Harry murmured softly to his companion, who merely shrugged in reply.

"...which Group I should join..." A tall bespectacled boy wrung his hands anxiously as another, a swarthy, and rather large boy clapped him heartily on the shoulder. "You can join the group I plan to create, Calvin!" Harry snorted mentally, instantly taking a dislike to the latter. Even if you had such plans, an intelligent person would not shout it out to the world until he had indeed done so.

At Durmstrang, there were no Houses. Rather, students in the school had to either join or create an existing Group, which could consist of any number of students equal to or more than seven.

Students could win or lose points for their Groups, depending on their performance in school, and the Group with the most points at the end of the year would win the title of "Champion of Groups", and along with the title, prestige and respect. Because so much depended on the size of the Group and the quality of the students, Group leaders had absolute discretion as to who to allow into their Groups; even the professors could not intervene. On one hand, a larger number of students meant more opportunities to gain points, but it also meant a higher risk of losing points. Hence, most Groups were around the size of fifteen to twenty people, according to Aleron. He had also said that there were ten Groups last year, with most Groups oriented along the lines of age. In a way, Harry supposed that made sense. No doubt the older students would want nothing to do with babysitting the younger...though Harry planned to change that.

Coming out from his musings, he noted that the auburn-haired boy had been eyeing him with a speculative gleam in his eyes. Wondering if his thoughts had shown on his face, Harry offered his hand to the boy with a charming politeness. "Harrison Maximus Riddle." The other boy took his hand and smiled. "Nice to meet you, I'm Emlen Zedar. This is my cousin Francis Sylvanus." He indicated his companion, who had gravity-defying chestnut coloured hair and a surly expression on his roundish face. "Don't mind him, he's just disappointed that his parents chose to send him to Durmstrang instead of Hogwarts." The last was said in a conspiratorial whisper, which caused Sylvanus' scowl to deepen. However, Harry merely nodded politely and introduced Daphne to the two boys. "My friend, Daphne Greengrass." After the rounds of polite introduction, all fell back into an easy silence as they followed the prefect through the long and windy corridors. Harry used the time to observe his fellow first-years, taking note in particular of those who were not chattering away at lightning speed.

Soon enough, they had entered the Great Hall, a tall-ceilinged room lit with crystal chandeliers with a white marble floor (the nicest room in the whole school, according to Aleron). With eleven marble tables of varying sizes in the hall, Deverill indicated that the first years should all sit at the largest long table of them all. Harry assumed that the students usually sat in their Groups, an assumption which proved correct when the Highmaster, Igor Karkaroff, a man with cold eyes and a pointy beard which curled at the tip, got up and addressed the students.

"Welcome, first-years, to Durmstrang Institute and a warm welcome back to our older students. This year, the Head Boy and Head Girl shall be Aries Zedar and Magnolia Fleetwood. Congratulations, Zedar and Fleetwood." Two students from the largest table in the middle of the hall stood up and bowed, allowing Harry to identify that table as the Group Blood Ravens' table. Aleron had revealed that with forty members comprising of most of the sixth and seventh year students, it was the largest Group at Durmstrang, and had usually won the championship, considering that each year end, they recruited only the best of the fifth years to the Group as the existing seventh years prepared for graduation.

Thereafter, as Karkaroff gave his speech, Harry continued observing his fellow year-mates. Emlen Zedar had scowled slightly as Aries was introduced. The resemblance between them led Harry to conclude that the two were probably brothers who had a possible sibling rivalry, though Harry privately thought that it was more of jealousy due to their large age gap.

Next to Harry, a blonde curly-haired boy with a pointed face and a slight frame leaned back in his seat and yawned openly at the Highmaster's speech. Harry glanced at him with slight amusement, even as one ear was kept peeled for any important announcements Karkaroff might make. The boy caught his eyes unabashedly, as if daring Harry to comment. Harry merely raised an eyebrow. While Karkaroff's speech was dead boring, it would have been a huge social gaffe to show any signs of his disinterest openly. "Hullo. My name's Korbin. Korbin Blishwick."

At that moment, Karkaroff ended his speech. Harry clapped politely with the rest before turning to Korbin with a polite, "A pleasure, Blishwick. Harrison Riddle." Korbin took Harry's hand and shook it briefly, before laughing. "I'm sure you have a bad impression of me already; you seem to be the straight-laced pureblood type. Whereas I, on the other hand..." he waved a hand self-deprecatingly. "I don't much care for proper social etiquette."

Harry's smile appeared deeply mysterious to Korbin. "Appearances, Blishwick, can be deceiving. But it has to be kept up." As Harry left a slightly intrigued Korbin to puzzle out his words, he turned to his meal, though not before noticing a small gleam in the eyes of the

boy seated opposite him; a dark-haired boy with a triangular face and a large frame, who had, Harry noticed, been rather quiet so far.

"Words of wisdom, Riddle. I applaud you for that." The boy inclined his head slightly, with that gleam in his eyes again; a gleam that Harry recognized as suppressed curiosity. Harry nodded politely at the compliment, waiting for the boy to continue. "Alexei Janus Krum. Please call me Alexei, Krum reminds me too much of my father and brother."

Krum, huh. Harry remembered that Silas had constantly referred to a Viktor Krum while telling Harry about Quidditch at his school, a genius of a player was supposedly the best Seeker in school. Could that be the brother this Alexei was talking about? Harry made a mental note to ask around discretely.

"Of course, Alexei. In that case, you may call me Harrison." Harry's smile was perfectly charming. His goal, after all, was to make friends. He watched as Daphne chatted away excitedly to two girls seated near her, before turning an assessing gaze onto the loud-mouthed boy he had taken an instant dislike to. The boy had already gathered his own small gang around him, Harry noted, though he wondered how many of them were just too weak-willed to resist his forceful advances. Well, I'll just have to do better than him then...

After dinner, Deverill came round again to hand out timetables. Harry noted with satisfaction that he would be taking the core classes of Charms, Transfiguration, Dark Arts, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy alongside the third years. It made sense since he was already far enough in his studies, rather than for him to start from the very basics like the other first-years. It was an advantage, really, to have the Highmaster working for one's father...Although Harry was still taking classes with the other first years in Astronomy, Herbology, European History of Magic, and Potions, subjects which the Dark Lord had not deemed important enough for Harry to learn in advance. Unfortunately, Durmstrang did not offer British History of Magic.

Then, they were led to their dormitory rooms, which was hidden behind a portrait of a sallow-faced wizard, whom Deverell informed them was Grigoriy Durathor, one of the founders of the school. "The password's blood-red. All of you first-years will be sharing a common

room for the first month, after which you'd have found a Group. The door of your dormitory rooms will then be magically linked to your Group's common room."

Leading them through the door hidden behind the portrait, Deverell pointed to two stair-cases leading up from the rather drafty, stone-floored and walled common room, with a few uncomfortable-looking chairs here and there. "The staircase on the right leads to the girls dormitories, the other one to the boys. Roughly five to a room, you may choose your own roommates." With that, he turned and left the common room, leaving the first years to their own devices. Harry swiftly calculated; there were fourteen boys in his year, which meant that one room could have only four boys but while Harry valued privacy, he knew the value of making friends more...

Turning to the boys he called out in a slightly raised voice, "Zedar, Sylvanus, Blishwick and Alexei, would you like to share a dorm room with me?" It was a calculated risk he took here, Harry knew. If any of them rejected his offer, he would have been seen as presumptuous and his standing would fall. On the other hand, if they accepted...

"Why not? Come on, Francis, let's meet our new roommates." Emlen smiled before dragging his still-moping cousin over. Korbin's reaction was even more dramatic. "Of course I'd love to! I thought you'd never ask," he battled his eyelashes at Harry slyly, before heading over to Harry's side. Alexei's response, thankfully, was more toned-down. "Thank you, Harrison. I accept."

And there it was, acknowledgement from his other year-mates for his taking charge. And the narrowed-eye stare from the swarthy boy was perhaps the best testimony of his first foray into establishing his presence; for the boy was no fool, he recognized a bid for leadership when he saw one. "I'll see you tomorrow then, Daphne," Harry smiled at his friend, confident that with her vivacious personality, she'd find roommates quickly. Daphne returned a brilliant grin, before turning to the two brunettes whom she had been talking to all dinner, even as Harry led the way to his dorm room.

Opening the door, he saw that there were five handsome four-poster beds arranged in the large room facing each other's general direction in two rows, three on one side and two on the other, with a rather wide passage in between the two rows. At the far wall, there was a huge panel of windows, which opened up to a beautiful view

of the lake. Harry strolled over the bed nearest the window, which belonged to the one in the row of three. "I'll be taking this bed then, if no one minds," he announced to his newfound friends, certain that no one would object. Sure enough, all of them shook their heads before choosing their own. Emlen took the one next to Harry, Alexei took the one diagonally across from Harry's and was the second nearest to the windows, Francis took the one besides Emlen's, the closest to the door, while Korbin took the last bed, the one facing Emlen's and Francis', next to Alexei's.

Unshrinking his trunk, Harry settled down to unpacking the necessities before he turned in for the night.

The next morning, Harry trooped down to the Great Hall with his roommates, watching with amusement as Emlen teased Francis about his bed hair. And quite bad it was too, tangled and still standing tall. Francis had apparently recovered from his sulk of the previous night, for he had retorted, "At least I have no history of baldness in my family, which means I'll still have hair when all of yours has dropped out." Emlen just laughed it off.

"And Harrison's just as messy." Francis had added, almost as an afterthought. It was true, Harry thought. His jet-black hair often refused to lie flat, sticking out all over the place. Taking out his wand, Harry cast a simple charm on his hair to make it look stylishly and artistically messy instead. Francis' eyes had widened upon seeing the effect, "Wicked." He breathed. "Hey Harrison, mind teaching me that spell?" Harry shrugged and smiled easily. "Why not? Tonight then, before we turn in."

After meeting up with Daphne for breakfast, the six trooped off to Herbology, which was taught by a very tanned Professor Dmitriy Belinsky, who spoke with a heavily accented English. Harry found the entire subject rather boring, though he supposed the plants looked interesting enough. "I've never liked gardening." He told Korbin and Alexei, whom he had been partnered with. Korbin laughed loudly and even Alexei's eyes shone with brief amusement.

"What's the matter, Riddle? Afraid to get your filthy half-blood hands even dirtier?" The sneering voice of one Brutus Gavis Flint, the loud-mouth swarthy boy of last night, who was working at the table next to Harry, cut in. Harry sighed mentally. He had known it would come up; Riddle was, after all, not a pure-blood surname. Thank Merlin no

one could accuse him of being a Mudblood, Durmstrang just did not let those kind in, after all.

"Well, in that case, to prevent even more filth from attaching itself to me, I'd rather not speak to you, Flint. That troll blood might be infectious, after all..." Harry sneered back contemptuously. It was an open secret that some generations ago, the Flint line had been polluted with that of a troll, much to their eternal shame. While the mixing of some creature blood was generally accepted as one of the draw-backs of a pureblood line, intermingling with one with a reputation like a troll, however, was not encouraged.

Flint's face turned an ugly shade of puce. "Why you..." Before he could do anything else however, the large and muscular Professor Belinsky was already by his table, "Now now, boys, hurry up with the repotting, the bell's going to ring soon." Flint turned a murderous glare at the teacher, however, Harry merely smiled and replied politely, "Of course, sir. My apologies." Never alienate the teachers...Harry mentally snickered at Flint's undiplomatic approach.

After lunch, Harry's yearmates trooped off to their Dark Arts lesson while Harry went to the library to complete the Herbology essay that Belinsky had assigned. When the bell finally rang for tea, Harry had long since finished the essay (List and explain five methods to deal with a Devil's Snare. Determine which is the best method.) and had moved on to reading from one of the books on intermediate Dark Arts that Harry had found in the library. Overriding the non-copying charm on the book with a dark spell that his father had taught him, Harry spelled himself a copy of the book which he shrunk and hid in his pockets before heading for tea.

Hearing his roommates chat excitedly about their first Dark Arts lessons, Harry was practically pounced upon by Daphne, "You've got to tutor us in this subject, Harrison!" Harry had smirked, amused, when the other boys had found out the reason behind his absence in the Dark Arts class. "How did you manage to get into the third-year classes?" Emlen had whispered in awed tones. Harry had shrugged casually, "My aunt has tutored me in the subject for a couple of years." And my father is the Dark Lord, he mentally added. Whom the Highmaster is working for.

His first Dark Arts class was interesting enough. Harry had been afraid that he would not have found it stimulating enough,

considering that he had spent three years under the tutelage of Bellatrix Lestrange. He soon found out however, that Bellatrix, as unlikely as it seemed, had tried to keep things age-appropriate, teaching him mostly jinxes and hexes, with only a few minor curses.

Professor Edgar Rosier, whom Harry knew was a cousin of Evan Rosier, however, saw no need to hold back with a class of third-years (mostly). "Confringo!" He demonstrated the Blasting curse on a conjured up dummy, exploding it into many, many tiny pieces, before giving a lecture on the properties of the curse and how to cast it. "Pronunciation and the wand movement is the key.

Frowning slightly, Harry raised his hand. "Yes, Mr. Riddle?" "Professor," Harry begun respectfully, "Would not intent and concentration matter much more?" Rosier eyed his new student in surprise for a few moments, before nodding. "You are correct, Mr. Riddle. At your level, pronunciation and the wand movement is quite important. However, as you become more accomplished with the spell, you'll learn that intent and concentration will determine the power of your curse. Very insightful, Mr. Riddle, take fifteen points to your future group."

Thereafter, he split the class into five groups, most probably according to Groups, setting them to practice the curse with five different dummies. Harry was placed into Aleron's and Silas' group, together with a scowling blue-haired female, a smiling red-haired female and a rather tanned male. "Harrison, this is Ivan Vavilov, leader of the Bats of the Dark, also known as Black Bats, our Group. And this is Ekaterina Durov and Steffi Stockmann, also members of our Group." Harry greeted them all courteously with impeccable manners, noting that they all had the symbol of a black-coloured bat spelled above the Durmstrang crest on their school robes, as well as embossed on the buckles of their belt.

He watched as all five of them took turns to cast the spell. Aleron had the most success; smoke issued from the dummy as small bits broke from it and it flew backwards to land on the floor, but it was still mostly whole. Then, it was Harry's turn. He gave red-haired Steffi a smile when she so kindly mended the dummy before his turn and set it straight again. Picturing the dummy breaking into pieces with a salvage glee, Harry waved his wand and pointed it at the dummy, pouring his will into his words, "Confringo."

With a small explosion, the dummy was blasted into many different pieces, though not as many as Rosier's had been. Harry hastily erected a solid shield to protect himself and his group from the falling pieces, as Professor Rosier called out, "Good job, Mr. Riddle. Take fifteen points." By the time the class had ended, Harry had forty-five points to contribute to his future Group and most of his classmates were eyeing him with speculative glances.

By the end of the first three weeks, word had spread that Harry was a prodigy. As a result, he had received offers of membership from many groups, even the Blood Ravens' closest rivals, the Jade Talons. Harry had declined all such offers politely, stating that he was not ready to decide – as a result, most Groups had assumed that he was forming his own Group, with his fellow year-mates, thus dismissing him as of no threat to them.

Indeed, Harry had quietly formed connections with his year-mates, except for those in Flint's little gang: Nero Clagg, Calvin Delaney, Amelia Bottlewick and Matthew Jewkes. He helped them out in their studies and generally maintained cordial relationships with them, though of course, he was closest to Daphne and his room-mates, with whom he often spent most of his free time.

One night, he gathered them all together in the dormitory room, even Daphne. "I'm going to open negotiations with the Black Bats' leader tomorrow." He told them quietly. All of them stared at Harry, surprised. "You're going to join their Group? Whatever possessed you to decide that?" Korbin asked Harry in disbelief. Emlen cocked his head slightly. "Yeah, Harrison, he has a point. They're merely ranked seventh after all, and with your talents, I'm sure many other higher-ranked Groups will welcome you with open arms."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "And how many talents are there in those higher-ranked Groups?" When none replied, Harry continued, "Many. At least a couple per Group, a handful in the highest-ranking ones. There would be no opportunity to shine in those Groups. Whereas for the Black Bats...their leader is only of an above-average caliber. He is friendly, true, which accounts for the number of year-mates following him, and even five of the second-years. But he has no true power, no charisma. The only others of worth in the gang are Ekaterina Durov, Aleron Mulciber and Silas Macnair. The latter two will not be a problem; the Group is essentially ripe for a take-over,

especially if I bring you all with me. Which brings me to the question: are you all willing to join me?"

Uncharacteristically, Alexei was the first to speak, "You have convinced me, Harrison. I will follow you." Privately, Harry thought it was because Alexei wanted a Group without any link to his brother Viktor, who was in the Maroon Wings, and so far, the only high-ranking group willing to take him in. Emlen and Francis exchanged glances, then Emlen grinned. "Why not? We're in. Even if you are a half-blood, you're better than Flint." Korbin shrugged and said with a lazy grin, "With you around, things will always be interesting. I'm with you." Daphne smiled at Harry, "Remember what I said on the train?" She tapped her wristband meaningfully. Satisfied, Harry dismissed his friends.

The next day, Harry purposely joined Ivan and Ekaterina during Charms, despite his usual partners being Aleron and Silas. "I want to speak to you alone, Vavilov. Tonight, in the Black Bats common room." Ivan glanced at Harry thoughtfully before agreeing. Satisfied, Harry cast the Summoning Charm on the wooden block they were supposed to summon from the teacher's table and watched as it lazily drifted towards him. "Oh, bravo, Mr. Riddle! Take fifteen points for being the first to successfully cast the charm!" Professor Victoria Eastwood cried, with a small wink at Harry. Harry smiled in amusement, knowing that she had a soft spot for cute little boys, which he supposed he currently was.

By now, Harry had accumulated three hundred points to contribute to whatever group he joined. It would have been more, but the Transfiguration teacher, Frederick Flint, was a relative of Brutus Flint and had taken a strong dislike to Harry as well (apparently, he had been told of the insult to the Flint's family), and kept taking points off from Harry for the slightest of one lesson, when Harry had been the first to successfully transfigure his bar of soap into a toad, which had subsequently croaked really loudly, the Transfiguration professor had snarled, "Riddle! Ten points for disrupting lessons." Harry had blinked before replying coolly, "It won't happen again, sir."

When Aleron had tried to stand up for Harry, Harry had calmly told him to shut up. "You can't expect the world to be a fair place, Aleron. Since he likes taking points from me, I'd just have to earn even more." He made sure to keep his cool and to show the proper respect and deference to Professor Flint, even if he sometimes felt

like wiping the smirk off the professor's face with a cunningly cast expression-changing hex. But no, Harry had to control himself. For that was what his father had told him; self-control is the key to controlling others.

Harry vowed that before his stint at Durmstrang was up, he would be the one pulling the strings of one Frederick Flint.

I'm going to speed up the story, so hopefully, Harry growing into his powers at Durmstrang won't take more than ten chapters or so. Unless er, you all feel like reading more about his education at Durmstrang?

Chapter Eleven: Plans

Dear Father,

How's everything going? You've often said that I cause too much trouble for you. So. Now that I'm away at school, I'd bet things are progressing pretty smoothly.

Anyway, I am enjoying myself in school. Instead of annoying you, I get to annoy this Transfiguration professor, who seems to dislike me. Now, Father, before you start planning his early demise, allow me to assure you that he's not a problem, at least not any more than an annoying insect is. I'd like to request that you allow me to deal with him on my own.

Of course, all the other teachers like me. My Charms professor, Victoria Eastwood, already has had me over in her office for tea. She thinks I'm an absolutely adorable little boy who can do no wrong. In fact, she's given me the most number of points out of all the teachers. A useful asset, really. I'll do my best to cultivate her, rest assured, just as you did in your schooling days to the Hogwarts professors. There's no crackpot old fool here, so I expect it'd be even easier for me.

The Groups system in Durmstrang is a pretty useful tool I must say. Due to the amount of points I've already accumulated, all the Groups are trying to court me. Unfortunately for them, they won't succeed. I already have my own plans after all. I won't bore you with details, but I'm sure you'll like the results.

Well, I'm off to do some pre-bedtime plotting now. I'd ask you to give Aunt Bella and the others my love, but I expect you'd crucio both me and them if I suggest it. So I won't bother. Good night, Father.

Harry

Voldemort folded the letter in amusement and placed it on his desk. Cheeky brat, he thought fondly, even as he petted a dozing Nagini rhythmically. Harry could be rather mischievous when he had a mind to be, though he always made sure he was properly respectful for serious conversations and of course, in front of the Death Eaters.

It surprised the Dark Lord sometimes, that Harry was so attached to some of his Death Eaters. Bella, Rabastan, Rodolphus and Barty. He supposed that Harry was just charismatic that way; not unlike how a young Tom Marvolo Riddle had been. Not that it was something that bothered the Dark Lord. Far from it in fact. It would be that much more advantageous to him if his Death Eaters were loyal to his heir too. There would certainly be less back-stabbing. One reason why Voldemort had been so reluctant to reveal his heir's presence to the other Death Eaters, aside from his most trusted, was that Harry was still vulnerable to attacks born out of pique or jealousy when he was this young.

Even if Harry was talented, he was still inexperienced. Voldemort knew that he could not afford for Harry's presence to be known to the common Death Eaters, and the rest of the wizarding world, until the boy was in his mid-teens. At the rate his son's power was growing, he would be pretty formidable by then, able to hold his own even if he were to be attacked. Perhaps when Harry was around fourteen or fifteen...

In any case, his own plans required at least that amount of time to come to fruition. In the years since his return, Voldemort had slowly infiltrated the important instruments of the Wizarding World, through the hands of his servants. At a word, he would be able to get articles published or withdrawn from mainstream media, including the Daily Prophet and the Witch Weekly. He had made tenuous overtures to the goblins of Gringotts, dropping hints subtly. Voldemort was certain that, by next year, the goblins would be amenable to the idea of a treaty. Ollivander, the famous wand-maker, had been approached and sworn to neutrality – Voldemort would have killed him had the man not been the most talented wand-maker in all of Britain, but in the end, he had decided that an Unbreakable Vow and the many other secrecy curses he had cast on the man would have to do in ensuring the man's silence.

Within the ministry, Voldemort had Lucius Malfoy. While not the best fighter or duelist, Abraxas Malfoy's son was every bit the consummate politician, just like his father had been. Within the few years since Voldemort's secret return, Lucius had much of the Ministry under his influence. The only areas where Lucius had not had any success in were the Auror's Office and the Department of Mysteries, which Voldemort attributed to the fact that Aurors tended to be the most stubborn Gryffindors or the most loyal Hufflepuffs,

while the Unspeakables were usually the most bookish Ravenclaws that were just not interested in material wealth. Nevertheless, Voldemort was confident that with time, Lucius would make progress.

Even many in the Wizengamot were deep in Lucius' pockets. It had almost been child's play to get the Wizengamot to pass the Anti-Werewolf Legislation that Dolores Umbridge had floated around...Voldemort had been quick to seize that opportunity when it presented itself. Left on her own, he had no doubt that Umbridge would eventually have passed the legislation, though not for a couple of years, since she was opposed at every turn by the creature-loving fool Albus Dumbledore. However, with Lucius' subtle and skillful influence, it had been passed early this month. It would make things that much easier for Voldemort when he finally approached the different werewolves clans for their support...

Which Voldemort would do once he had consolidated his power base. Currently, the number of his Death Eaters stood at fifty-seven, which, while not an unrespectable amount, was still not yet enough for the Dark Lord's plans. Recruitment had been rather slow of late, especially since the Dark Lord could not allow his return to become public knowledge as yet. Though he did allow certain rumours...especially since it served to bring him new recruits. Well. There was no need to be impatient. Voldemort fully expected the wheels to be set into motion soon. In the meantime, he merely had to ensure that his Death Eaters were well-trained. A smirk split his lipless mouth as he contemplated setting Barty, who had been getting rather restless of late, to train the new recruits...

And thus did Lord Voldemort, Dark Lord of Wizarding Britain, ruminate upon his plans late into the night.

A new year back at Durmstrang. Aleron Mulciber relaxed into his bed, staring blankly up at what he could make out of the wooden board of his four-poster bed. Somehow, things did not seem to have worked out quite as he expected, despite the young master's presence at Durmstrang.

Aleron had naively believed that the young master would set about his conquest of the school immediately, perhaps setting up a new Group all on his own. He had been fully prepared to abandon the Black Bats for whatever Group his young master set up, and to take some of the second and third-years with him. After all, the only

reason why he had joined the Black Bats was because Ivan had invited him to do so as his second-in-command. And the fact that he sort of counted Ivan as a friend...

All of which would not matter if Harrison required Aleron's services in any way. His father had often told him that it was an honour to serve under the right master. And young though Aleron was, he believed that he had found that master. He just knew he would find satisfaction in serving one Harrison Maximus Riddle well, satisfaction which his father never found. Unfortunately, the elder Mulciber was a rather mediocre wizard, and his loyalty to the Dark Lord was not of much value. It was because of Aleron's late grandfather's long service to the Dark Lord really, that Mulciber Senior was even amongst the Dark Lord's inner circle.

So. Instead of questioning the young master, Aleron had decided to do what any loyal follower would – he bided his time and waited. Even if he did not like it when the young master's plans involved said young master presenting the very image of a model student for the time being...Aleron would have happily retaliated against the Transfiguration Professor, even if he would get detention or worse, had Harrison not stopped him. Scowling slightly, he recalled how Frederick Flint had treated his young master – unfairly and aggressively. But no, he would not do anything yet, since it was what Harrison wished.

Aleron knew Silas was not as patient though. For someone who claimed to not want to serve the young master whole-heartedly, Silas seemed inordinately eager for Harrison to make his move. Aleron had to have several sharp words with his friend in order to convince him not to confront the young master about it. It had only been a few weeks, for Merlin's sake, there was still plenty of time for any plans to be put into action.

Aleron knew that whatever it was, it would be brilliant. But of course, there was no way Aleron would know until Harrison actually told him, though he guessed it had something to do with the Black Bats, if the young master's questions were anything to go by. Well, he would try to see what he could figure out tomorrow. For now, he ought to catch some sleep...He yawned slightly, then smiled as his eyes fell on the wristband that he constantly wore. It was the young master's own mark, and Aleron was proud to be wearing it.

Albus Dumbledore sat at his desk as he leaned back and twiddled his thumbs. Three weeks into the new term and already a horde of problems was banging on his door, waiting to be addressed. It was this year, this year that one Harry James Potter, Boy-who-lived, would have entered Hogwarts were it not for his disappearance four years ago.

And it seemed that people remembered. The amount of hate mail that he got the first week of the term had risen to such proportions that Albus had set up an automatic incinerating spell designed to burn all his hate mail before it even touched his desk. It worked on Howlers too, a fact over which Albus was rather pleased. He had been getting rather tired of being screamed at by shrieking women who appeared to treat the Boy-who-lived's disappearance as a personal affront.

Really now. It had only been a small mistake on his part of not checking on the boy often enough. The most that the Wizengamot had been able to do was to strip him of his Chief Warlock position, as well as to impose a small fine for his negligence. Albus consoled himself with the fact that while the number of his detractors appeared to have grown, there were still those who were intensely loyal to him, particularly those who had fought in the war as members of the Order of the Phoenix.

Of course, as soon as Severus had brought back reports of Voldemort's return after his first Death Eater meeting in nine years, Albus had reformed the Order of the Phoenix. New members were rather rare, as his not-so-spotless reputation had people leery of believing him when he had made an announcement of the Dark Lord's return. Yet there were still those who had seen the signs of Voldemort's return and had been willing to join him. Unfortunately, there were also those who had slowly begun distancing themselves from the Order, not because they did not believe in Voldemort's return, but because they did not think he was able to lead the efforts against Voldemort adequately. Young Sirius, in particular, had been gaining an independent streak lately...which would no doubt cause Albus many problems in future, since the Aurors mostly followed Sirius' lead.

Well then. He would have to do something about it. But no, it wouldn't do to alienate Sirius. The young man was now in a position of some influence and power. Especially since his parents had

passed away some years ago and he was now the Head of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black. Thankfully, both Remus and James, Sirius' two best friends, firmly believed in him.

Thoughts of James brought a smile to Albus's face and a twinkle to his bright blue eyes. His old student was now the Professor of the Dueling elective at Hogwarts. It had been a strategy aimed to kill two birds with one stone – Albus knew James had been getting restless after a few years of unemployment. Not that James needed employment. The Potter family, after all, was an old pure-blooded and wealthy family, with wealth rivaling that of the Malfoys. And while James chose to live modestly (less so since his new wife Samantha had married him), the investments made by his father continued to generate huge amounts of revenue that would last them generations. Still, James Potter was not the type suited for a life of indolent luxury. Neither was he into politics, the other route such heirs tended to take. As such, Albus had decided to arrange employment for James at Hogwarts, if only to prevent him from sinking into yet another bout of depression.

He had to admit that that was one of his brilliant moves. Not only did the students appear to love having James Potter, famous ex-Head Auror, as their Professor (the number of sign-ups for this elective was higher than any other), Albus was confident that he would be getting plenty of well-trained new members for the Order of the Phoenix come next graduation day.

And thus did the Headmaster of Hogwarts and leader of the Order of the Phoenix ruminate upon his plans late into the night.

That morning, a letter had magically appeared in the small black, two-way letter-box Harry had brought with him from home. A birthday present from his father, it provided Harry with a secure way to communicate with his father, for the password for opening the letter-box was in Parseltongue. Letters placed in the box automatically appeared in an identical box on his father's desk, and letters his father placed in his box would appear in Harry's. Sliding it out of its plain black envelope, Harry scanned through the short letter quickly.

Harry,

I am pleased that you have taken my lessons to heart. It seems that you have decided to do more than study during your time at school. While your plans are admirable, I expect you not to allow your grades to suffer. In any case, you appear to be enjoying your education at Durmstrang. However, it seems to have encouraged your cheek. Do not assume, brat, that it will go unpunished merely because of distance.

Your father

Harry gave a soft yelp of surprise as he felt his fingers start to burn when he had finished reading the letter. Even after he released the letter, the mild burning sensation continued, spreading all the way to his shoulders before it finally died off. Examining his fingers and arm gingerly, Harry shook his head ruefully. His father was right. He had been quite cheeky in his letter last night, assuming that his father could not retaliate. But the Dark Lord, evil genius that he was, had found a way, it seemed. Oh well. The packaged burning curse was no worse than a stinging hex, so Harry smirked as he incinerated the letter, and did not feel the slightest bit deterred from being cheeky.

But that'd have to wait. For now, it's time to put my plan into action.

I know there's not much action in this chapter, but I promise Harry will star in the next! It'd be out in a couple of days:)

Chapter Twelve: Durmstrang Year One Part II

That night, Harry entered the Black Bats' common room with the password provided by Aleron. Glancing at the black wooden furnishings and the black carpet on the floor, he thought that the whole room looked rather gloomy. Even the candlesticks were black, and gave off only a rather sickly pale light. Ivan sat by the fireplace in a rather tensed, position, twirling his wand in his hand, which told Harry volumes about his nervousness.

With a polite smile, Harry gestured to the fireplace. "May I?" At Ivan's nod, Harry cast a spell and black flames lit up the fireplace, warming the entire room instantly. At Durmstrang, the fireplaces were not automatically tended to, for the staff thought that it would be character-building for students to suffer the cold until they learnt to cast their own warming spells. Needless to say, many a student had fallen sick to the chill during the autumn and winter seasons, for even autumn in Durmstrang was chilly. Thanks to Harry however, the first-year students this year had a common room with a perpetual fire burning.

Ivan looked impressed when Harry turned around. "That's the darker version of Gubraithian Fire, isn't it?" Harry smirked. "Indeed. I'm afraid I can't quite manage Gubraithian yet." This minor, darker version required much less skill and power, though it would not last forever, unlike the Gubraithian everlasting fire.

When Ivan finally tore his eyes away from the black flames, he asked Harry, "So Riddle, what's on your mind?" Harry had taken a seat opposite Ivan, he leant back and crossed his legs. "I have a proposition for you, Valvilov. I know you want to become a Prefect, and that you wish to do it by this year." Aleron had told Harry of Ivan's dying mother's wish, which was to see her son in a position of authority, and of the fact that it was likely that Mrs. Valvilov would not survive the year. Which had been the reason why Ivan had splintered off from the Jade Talons the previous year.

Despite his attempt to look otherwise, it was quite obvious that Ivan was intrigued. "Pray continue." Harry smirked before continuing, "While you are likely to eventually make Prefect, there is a very slim chance of that happening this year and you know it, Valvilov." As a dark shadow crossed Ivan's face, Harry's smirk widened. "No need to brood, Valvilov. I can guarantee that you'll win the Easter

elections." Prefects at Durmstrang, all eighteen of them, were selected through elections. All students could participate in the elections, and vote for two out of the roughly twenty-six or so candidates who usually ran for the position, anywhere from one to five members per Group. The top eighteen candidates with the most number of votes would get to become Prefects for a year.

Ivan's eyes narrowed. "Why should I believe you? And what do you want in return?" Harry tilted his head to one side. "You have everything to gain and nothing to lose by believing in me, Valvilov. As for what I want in return, why, it's only a little something. I want you to allow myself and five other first-years into the Black Bats Group next week. As well as a magical oath..." Hooked despite himself, Ivan could not help but ask, "And what is that oath?"

"A simple one, Valvilov. That you'll abdicate upon becoming a prefect, and turn the leadership of the Black Bats to me, willingly and ungrudgingly." Ivan shuddered mentally as he took in the predatory smile that the eleven-year old sported, as well as the dangerous glint in his emerald green eyes. He's dangerous...Ivan thought privately, finally realizing how expertly he had been played. And yet, even knowing that, Ivan could not help but give in to Riddle's demands. For Ivan desperately needed to become a Prefect. And Riddle knew that.

"Very well, Riddle. I, Ivan Vladimir Valvilov, promise upon my magic that, upon my election as a Prefect, I'll step down and pass the leadership position of the Black Bats Group to you, Harrison Maximus Riddle, willingly and ungrudgingly. So mote it be." Ivan spoke the words, feeling the bindings of a magical oath tighten around him momentarily.

"So mote it be," Harry echoed in satisfaction. First stage in his plan, completed.

"Who do you have on your side, Riddle? How did you know?" For there was no doubt in Ivan's mind that Harry knew the whole story behind Ivan's bid for power; he had been too sure of himself for it to be any other situation. The younger student's smirk was arrogant. "Why, Ivan, didn't you know? Your second-in-command belongs to me."

With that, Harry left the room.

Thereafter, Harry could be seen mingling with all first and the second years, as well as a select few third years who were in the Checkered Knights Group (ranked second last). He ignored Brutus Flint and his little gang, who had joined the Golden Boys Group, which was only one rank higher in ranking than the Black Bats. Because of his prowess in certain subjects, he was able to offer help to first, second and third year students, effectively gaining allies and goodwill across all three levels.

Within the Black Bats group, which now had eighteen members after Harry and his fellow year-mates entered, Harry was unofficially recognized as the leader of the first-years, with an official position just beneath Aleron and Ekaterina. And everyone could see that the second-in-command, Aleron deferred to Harry whenever called upon, a fact which mystified most in the group. Harry merely smiled whenever anyone commented upon it, and set about binding the members loyalty to him. He also worked to increase their familiarity with each other. Before, the second and third years pretty much kept to their own year-mates save for group meetings, now, they all interacted more frequently, even sitting amongst each other during meal times at the Black Bats' table in the Great Hall.

Just before the Christmas break, Harry had utilized the wristband to summon Aleron and Silas to a deserted classroom on the fourth floor. As soon as the duo entered, both bowed to Harry, who was seated on the teacher's desk, with Aleron's bow being the deeper and more respectful of the two. "Young Master," Aleron had greeted naturally. After three months of hearing nothing but his name from the teen's lips, Harry had honestly thought that Aleron would have forgotten the more respectful address, and was pleasantly surprised when this was not the case.

"Aleron, Silas. I will be getting Draco to throw a small party just for us children two days after Christmas itself. I want your assessment of who amongst the second and third years you think will be amenable to an invitation." Harry ordered as the two teenagers stood before him.

Aleron smiled. So the young master is setting the stage for recruitment... He had thought that with all the political intrigue going on amongst the student population at Durmstrang, Harry would have

limited his goals to just school politics. Really, the young master's brilliance continuously surprised Aleron.

"Septimus and Octavius Withers, Young Master, would welcome it – they're both from pure-blooded family with a strong history of blood purity ideals. And they respect what they have seen of your power so far, from the demonstrations in the third-year classes we share. They're also drawn to your charisma; Septimus told me that he found the speech you gave to the Black Bats on Halloween logical and enchanting." Aleron had purposely sounded out the two subtly, for he knew the triangular-faced, blonde-haired blue eyed Aryan twins were even more talented than Silas, and was second only to himself amongst the third-year males.

Silas nodded in agreement. He had been observing Harrison Riddle very closely for the past few months, and sub-consciously had come to the conclusion that his friend was right. Harrison was a master worth serving, demanding but just, extremely intelligent and powerful. However, Silas was not ready to admit that to himself just yet, so he continued to show subtle reluctance to fully embrace Riddle's position. "Yeah, most of the third years in the Black Bats are fine. Though I wouldn't invite Ekaterina or Ivan if I were you. Ekaterina dislikes you, because she thinks you're going to try to usurp Ivan's position, and Ivan...well, his attitude just doesn't make sense."

Aleron nodded. "It's true. Ivan's attitude...it almost seems that all the fight's gone out of him...he doesn't even seem to be doing much to gain himself votes."

Harry smirked at Aleron's and Silas' observation. The two were perceptive indeed, Harry gave them that. Ivan had become depressed after Harry's confrontation with him, and rather understandably so. For once his year as a Prefect was up, he might not have a chance at glory again. Ivan was just smart enough to know that once he had given up control of his Group to Harry, he would have no future to speak of.

Thus far, Harry had kept his deal with Ivan a secret. Looking at Aleron and Silas though, Harry decided to reveal some portion of his plans to them...By the time he had finished, Aleron's and Silas' gaze was filled with awe, even as they struggled to keep their expressions suitably neutral.

"Young Master, I shall serve you to the best of my abilities to aid you in achieving your goals," Aleron finally murmured, bowing low.

Christmas.

Brutus Flint had taunted Harry when he had found out that Harry would be staying at Durmstrang for most of the break; he would only be Flooing home for four days, from Christmas Eve to the day of the party at Malfoy Manor. It was only logical, since the Dark Lord had plans for Christmas – he was going to give the Order of the Phoenix a lovely Christmas surprise. But Flint, idiot that he was, had taken it to mean that Harry was not wanted at home. Unfortunately for Flint, he had taunted Harry in the corridor outside the Library, in full hearing of Aleron, Silas, Septimus and Octavius, who had just left the Library.

Aleron had taken offense, immediately casting the skull-mutating hex at Flint. "Mutatio Skullus!" he had shouted, before watching dispassionately as Flint's head twisted and distorted until it did not remotely resemble a human head. When a terrified Nero and Calvin had escorted Flint away, presumably to the Healing Bay, Harry had rounded on Aleron.

Slap! Slap! Harry had backhanded the older teen twice forcefully across his left cheek. "That, Mulciber, was a particularly stupid thing to do. In a corridor, where anyone could have witnessed the attack, and in full view of the portraits?" Harry had nodded at a gaping portrait of a dour-faced old man, before casting a muttered spell under his breath that would obscure the portrait's memory of the event. If worse came to worse, he could always use Karkaroff, he had mused.

Harry had turned back to Aleron, who had slowly kneeled under the weight of Harry's wrath. Harry had regarded the teen silently, letting him stew in his own juices for a few seconds, before he icily ordered, "In future, I expect you to take your cues from me. Do not act without using your brains, or slap marks will be the least of your worries. Is that understood?"

Aleron had gazed up at Harry as shame and guilt burned in his stomach, leaving a sour taste in his throat. He had been rash and foolish, had acted without permission. He could have caused them Group points and gotten them into trouble; both of which the young

master could not afford at this stage of the plan. And worst of all, with his over-the-top reaction, he had inadvertently hinted at a deeper relationship between the two to those present, most notably of all, the Withers twins and the Flint gang, a relationship which the young master was not yet ready to reveal. "Yes, Young Master." He had wanted to add more, whether to apologize profusely for his error or to beg for forgiveness he did not know, but the young master had only asked one question. And he had not dared to speak out of turn, not when he was already in trouble.

With a final disapproving glance, Harry had swept off. Minutes had passed before Aleron had finally risen to his feet. "I have an effective Bruise Removal Paste in my trunk," Silas offered, seeking to break the tension. Aleron had touched his cheek gingerly, before replying, "You heard what he said about slap marks – I doubt I'm allowed to ease the bruising." Silas had raised an eyebrow, "That'll probably take all week to fade naturally."

"I deserve it," Aleron had flatly stated, before turning to regard the two Withers twins, who had been silent throughout the entire exchange. Now, what should I tell them?

By the time the twins had turned up at Malfoy Manor two days after Christmas, Harry knew that they were somewhat aware of the relationship between Aleron and him.

"Welcome, Septimus, Octavius," Harry greeted his guests with a polite and amiable smile. "Allow me to introduce you to my friend, Draco. Draco, these are my fellow Group mates from Durmstrang." Harry and Draco had kept each other relatively updated on the status of their respective plans and exploits, so Draco knew about the Withers twins. "Welcome to my Manor, Misters Withers." The two twins exchanged glances before murmuring appropriately polite greetings to the host and to Harry.

After Harry had welcomed all the guests, he hung back with Draco for a few words, after casting a suitable privacy charm. "So Draco, what do you think of my followers so far?" Draco had cast an assessing gaze at them, before replying, "Honestly Harrison? I'm impressed. You've managed to drawn quite a number of them to you, even if some are works-in-progress. Theo and I haven't had much luck I'm afraid. House rivalries are firmly entrenched; we can only speak openly in the Slytherin common rooms. Aside from Theo,

Pansy, Vince and Greg, we've only managed a tentative alliance with Blaise Zabini, Millicent Bulstrode and Tracey Davis." He nodded towards the three Hogwarts first-years present at the party who were not children of Death-Eaters.

Harry lay a comforting hand on Draco for a few moments, "There's still time, Draco, don't fret. I know it must be hard to work beneath the old coot's nose." Draco gave Harry a genuine smile, before they dispelled the privacy charm and headed to the party, with the goal to promote mingling between Hogwarts and Durmstrang students, as well as to cast Harry in a positive light to the few who did not yet know him.

By the end of the night, Harry could say with satisfaction that he had had some success in both regards. He told his father as much smugly, later that night.

Voldemort gave his son an amused glance before reaching out to ruffle his hair slightly. "Indeed, I must congratulate you Harry. You play this game well, far better than I had expected." He smiled at his son with no little pride, watching Harry bask in his father's praise.

"Father, what did you do to the Order of the Fried Chicken?" Harry asked cheekily a few moments later. "A reminder of my presence, my son." Voldemort had revealed mysteriously. At his son's pleading gaze, he relented and elaborated, "Some werewolves took it upon themselves to visit a member of the Order, to spread the festive cheer. Alas, the Order member was unable to appreciate their visit, hence he and his family ended up quite dead." Harry clapped his hands appreciatively. "I just wish I can see that old coot's face when he got the news. By your usage of the werewolves, I take it the ministry is still denying your return?" Voldemort had inclined his head, before father and son shared a laugh at the foolish blindness of the Ministry.

School picked up pace when Harry returned from the Christmas holidays. Between his political machinations for the elections, his school work and his extra studies, Harry soon found himself with no time to relax. One day, while reading in the Black Bats common room, Harry decided to take a short break. Retrieving his broom, he was on his way out when Aleron came in. Eyeing the latter speculatively for a few seconds, Harry had suddenly said. "Join me." It was not a

question. A few minutes later, Aleron was flying over the lake alongside Harry.

For the first time since Christmas, Harry found himself relaxing as, despite the frigid winter air, he basked in the relative warmth of the sun and the sparkling waters of the lake. Aleron followed slightly behind, unsure of his welcome after his blunder before the Christmas holidays. Harry sighed mentally as he pulled up beside his devoted friend. "Aleron."

"Yes, Young Master?" Harry tossed Aleron a small smile. "I'm not entirely like my father, Aleron. After the punishment is over, everything is forgiven. I merely expect you to do better next time." Aleron smiled back at Harry as he relaxed his shoulders, releasing the tension had been present in him every time he saw Harry since before Christmas break. "Thank you, Young Master."

Harry cocked his head slightly, "You took your punishment well. I was quite surprised when I saw the mark still present during the Christmas party." Aleron shrugged ruefully. "I screwed up – badly. I'll take my licks." Harry laughed at that, before changing the subject, quizzing Aleron on the flying abilities of the Black Bats' members.

As the Easter break approached, the entire castle was abuzz with the Prefectural Elections just around the corners. Candidates could be seen handing out pamphlets and little memorabilia to anyone and everyone, aided by their fellow Group mates. Ekaterina and Steffi had created round badges which changed words when pressed, rotating between 'Ivan for Prefect!' and 'Black Bats rocks!', which they had distributed to all the Black Bat members. Harry had sighed when he saw them, before reluctantly donning one, for he recognized that it was a good form of advertising. He then sent the second-year females, Wenda Stockmann and Rune Russwurm, in addition to dear Daphne, to spread the story of Ivan's reason for winning the election amongst the female population; a move which Harry knew would appeal to the sympathetic instincts of the majority of that population, while he ordered the rest of the second-years and the first-years to paste posters of Ivan Vavilov anywhere and everywhere, including the toilets. Harry then went around subtly reminding everyone whom he had helped in one way or another that he really wanted Ivan to win the elections.

By the day of the election, Harry was confident that Ivan would secure a position. He counted almost fifty confirmed votes, which, in a population of less than two hundred students, was quite a lot. However, even he was surprised when the results came out and Ivan came in eighth, out of the eighteen winning positions, with a total of seventy three votes. Apparently, Harry's strategy had worked better than expected; there were much more of females belonging to Groups with only one Prefect candidate who, after casting the first vote for their Group member, had cast the second for Ivan in sympathy than Harry had expected.

After the party celebrating Ivan's win, at which Harry allowed himself to enjoy the fruits of his labour, Ivan had addressed the Black Bats one last time as their leader. "In light of my recent elevation, I have decided to dedicate most of my time to upholding my duties as a Prefect. As such I feel that I am no longer able to lead the Bats of the Dark, and I now pass over my position to a more worthy candidate: Harrison Maximus Riddle." Stunned silence reigned in the common room for a moment, before Aleron had led the room in a standing ovation for their new leader.

Harry had stood up then, and said smoothly, "I thank Ivan for his kind words. I am more than ready to uphold the full mantle of responsibility for this position. My friends and fellow Group members, this I swear to you, I will bring our Group to heights never before reached. And in light of this resolve, henceforth, our Group name shall be changed to the Dark Court of the Night, also known as the Night Serpents. And our crest shall be modified as such." With a wave of his wand, all the crest on the blood red robes changed from a black bat to a rearing black serpent with gleaming fangs extended, poised to strike, with the cursive lettering Dark Court of the Night beneath. Save on Harry's robes, for his serpent, instead of black, was silver.

As Harry sat down again, he felt a thrill of anticipation as step two in his plan was completed.

Whispers followed Harry the next morning as rumours abounded about Vavilov's abdication. Some thought Harry had threatened or blackmailed the ex-leader, others thought that the latter had been placed under the Imperius curse, while still others contented that Harry was a reincarnated dark lord sent to take over the Groups.

Harry ignored them all and went about his daily routine, privately amused at the students' vivid imagination.

In May, just before the start of the exam period, Harry once again shocked everyone when he accepted a Quidditch challenge from the Ivory Horns, with a bet of 200 Group points at stake on a clear win. If the Night Serpents lost, they would slide down to the ninth position, however, if they won, they would be catapulted to the fourth position. With Aleron as Keeper, Alexei and the Stockmann sisters as Chasers, the Withers twins as Beaters, and Harry as seeker, the match took place on a bright and sunny Saturday, in the Quidditch pitch on the open grassland between the two forests.

"And they are off! From the Night Serpents, Mulciber, Krum, Stockmann, Stockmann, Withers, Withers, aaaaand Riddle! A rather interesting line-up, and rather last minute too...certainly, no one expected them to accept the Ivory Horns' challenge..." the commentary was provided by a fifth year Sylvia Bottlewick, the rather flighty older sister of Amelia Bottlewick, who was a member of Flint's gang.

"And Krum scores! The younger brother of Viktor Krum, star seeker of the Maroon Wings, who seems to have shared his brother's talent, and it's 0-10 to the Night Serpents." Harry flew around the pitch lazily, ignoring the commentator, keeping one eye on his team with the other eye peeled open for the Snitch. His opposite was a fifth year by the name of Dacian Wiggleworth, a reedy and thin boy who looked to be about thirteen instead of fifteen, who was currently marking him closely.

Harry smirked sadistically; it was a smirk that used to send Draco running for cover. But Wiggleworth did not know that, so he merely returned the smirk. Then suddenly, Harry pulled into a fast dive, racing for the ground at top speed. "And Riddle pulls into a sharp dive! Look at him go! Has Riddle seen the snitch?" Hundred meters...fifty....twenty...ten...Harry finally pulled up from the dive when he was barely one meter from the ground, his toes skimming the grass. His opponent though, was not so lucky. Although Wiggleworth had realized the Wronski Feint for what it was sometime during the last ten metres, he had not managed to brake in time and had crashed into the ground, albeit at a slower speed than otherwise. Blood dripped from Wiggleworth's broken nose even as he moaned loudly.

His bloodlust sated, Harry laughed as he took to the skies once more, even as the Ivory Horns' captain frantically called for a time-out. "Great flying, Captain," Octavius and Septimus called out simultaneously. Harry returned a thumbs-up and a cheerful wave.

After that, it was almost too easy for the Night Serpents. Despite not having much training in working as a team, Aleron and the Stockmann sisters were decent flyers, the twins could be considered good ones, and Alexei and Harry were amongst the top few in school. The Ivory Horns were severely demoralized by Wigglesworth's crash. As a result, when Harry finally caught the snitch, the final score was 200-0.

Harry smirked in triumph at the helplessly fluttering snitch in his tightly clenched fists. Maybe, just maybe, he would learn to enjoy Quidditch.

The school year ended in a flurry of exams. As expected, Harry was top in almost half of his classes, even the ones he took with third-years. The ones he did not top, namely Transfiguration, Arithmancy, Herbology and Potions, he came in amongst the top five, with his most horrible subject being Transfiguration, to the surprise of no one. Harry had actually smirked when he realized that Professor Flint had not managed to find a way to grade him any lower than the fifth position.

Then suddenly, trunks were packed, shrunk and kept in pockets. Students residing in Britain and a few other countries banning underage magic were given letters warning them not to use magic over the holidays. Before they left the common room for the last time that year, Harry had given his Group mates a genuine smile, vowing to catapult them even higher in the rankings next year.

I hope you all enjoyed Harry's first year. I kept it short, as I hope to keep it within the limits I have set for this part of the story.

Chapter Thirteen: Summer

That summer, the Dark Lord had taken one look at Harry's results slip and pronounced that he should be doing better. Harry had sighed as he listened to his father's lecture half-heartedly. Sometimes, it was tough having a genius for a father. Apparently, the young Tom Riddle had consistently been top for all his classes every single year. The Dark Lord had ended with a pronouncement that he would be personally teaching Harry the Dark Arts from now on, and that he expected Harry to complete all the homework assigned by the school by the first week.

"Because from the second week onwards, you'll be too busy with work assigned by me to even think about school work," the Dark Lord had said with an evil gleam in his eyes. Harry had groaned softly at that. But in the end, the only thing Harry could do was to reply with a, "Yes, Father."

That first week, other than time spent doing his homework, Harry had spent all the rest of his time playing modified Quidditch with Draco, Theo and the rest of the Slytherin first-year boys, as well as Aleron and Silas, enjoying the bright blue cloudless skies, rolling green fields and the warmth of the sun kissing one's skin. Draco had complained that first years weren't allowed broomsticks at Hogwarts, a fact which Harry thought was strange: he later figured out that it was another one of Dumbledore's plots to ensure that the Mudbloods would not feel left out. After all, were it not to level out the playing field between those who had and those who did not have magical background, there would be no need to ban first-years from Quidditch - most magical children grew up playing the sport, or at least, learnt how to fly.

"Next year though, I'll get onto the Slytherin team next year." Draco had vowed. Harry had smiled sweetly at his friend, and promised to help him train his Quidditch skills. "Without the heart-stopping stunts." Draco had quantified. Sighing, Harry had pursed his lips slightly before reluctantly agreeing. "You're no fun anymore, Draco."

Draco had scowled at that. "Save your sadism for Brutus Flint, Harrison." Theo had joined in then, with a question, "Say, isn't Flint our House Quidditch captain's name? You think they could be related?" Harry shrugged before snickering, "From what you've

described to me, Marcus Flint sounds like he has Troll blood too. So yes, I'd say that they're related."

Then, the week of relative relaxation ended. Harry was assigned various tutors for each of the subjects he had not achieved top marks in: Herbology, Potions, Arithmancy and Transfiguration. After the first two-hour lesson he had with his Uncle Rody, he vowed never to get less than top marks again in Arithmancy; he liked the man well enough, but Rodolphus Lestrangle was the most boring teacher in the world. Harry swore that he would rather take remedial Arithmancy with Professor Kai-zhong Lee everyday for the rest of second year before he would take lessons with Rodolphus again next summer.

For Transfiguration, Barty had found no fault with Harry's work. It was then that Harry had reluctantly revealed his feud with Frederick Edmund Flint, uncle of one Brutus Gavis Flint, which had prompted Barty to dissolve into a laughing fit at some of the things Frederick Flint had taken points off for. "For desecrating the sanctity of the school spirit when you Transfigured a red cushion into a bluejay? And for disrupting the class when the toad you Transfigured from a bar of soap croaked loudly? Ah, the nerve of the man..."

After regaining control of himself, Barty finally asked, "And you just took it lying down, Young Master?" Scowling, Harry had shot back, "I was not about to start a war with a Professor in my first year. I had things to do; to consolidate the support of my Group members, I could not afford to lose too many Group points." Barty had had no choice but to concede the point as he raised his hand in placating gesture. "You showed true self-control then, Young Master. And to think that Master said you had none!"

Herbology was taught by, of all people, Draco's mother Narcissa. Since becoming Draco's best friend, Harry had taken to addressing Lucius as "Uncle Lucius" and hence, Narcissa automatically became "Aunt Narcissa" to Harry. Despite her impeccable grooming, Narcissa Malfoy nee Black did not mind getting down and dirty with the plants. While teaching Harry the correct way to re-pot a Mandrake baby, Narcissa had calmly braved the dirt and dust. At the end of the lesson, Harry had tried to apologise for being the cause of ruining Narcissa's grooming and image, however, she had merely waved him off.

"Nonsense, Young Master. The image of the Malfoy is carefully cultivated for outsiders. Since you became Draco's best friend and Bella's...protégé, Lucius and I have long since considered you family." She had then bestowed a warm smile at Harry, unlike her usual cold, polite public smile. Harry had once again marveled at the Malfoy's ability to present an aloof, cold and perfect façade to the outside world.

Potions. For this particular subject, Harry floored to Malfoy Manor every Friday afternoon to take lessons with Draco and Theo with one Severus Snape. Since the Dark Lord did not fully trust Snape as yet, he usually cast a heavy glamour on Harry's eyes and hair, turning them an azure blue and auburn respectively before he allowed Harry to the Manor for lessons. Harry's real surname name was also never revealed to Snape; instead, Snape knew Harry as Draco's friend from Durmstrang, Emlen Zedar. Emlen had thought it a good joke when Harry had mentioned borrowing his name, and promised to get his parents to mention that yes, he was indeed getting tutored in Potions by the Hogwarts Potions master should anyone make an inquiry. With the same eye and hair coloring, it was unlikely that anyone would make a detailed enquiry as to discover the lie.

In the large, airy potions laboratory made hazy by the fumes of the brewing potions, Severus Snape scowled heavily as he stared at his three students for the summer. When Lucius Malfoy had cajoled/bribed Severus into teaching his son for the summer, he had not mentioned that there would be two other 'hanger-ons'. While he found Nott's presence tolerable, considering that he was also one of his Slytherins and a fellow Death-eater's son, he was irked by the presence of the boy from Durmstrang.

Perhaps it was the way the boy had smirked at him upon being introduced to him, or perhaps it was the insolent manner in which the boy made eye contact with him, with that hint of a challenge in them. Nevertheless, Severus found himself disliking Zedar on sight. The problem was, the boy was careful to keep his tone neutral and even slightly respectful, so Snape could not find an excuse to refuse to teach the boy.

In addition, while the boy was not as naturally talented as Draco, he had deft hands and an eye for the sort of quick, precise work that the ingredients generally needed to be prepared with. Thus, he

could not truly fault him for much, even as he found himself nit-picking on Zedar with the attitude that he usually used on Gryffindors.

"Zedar, the colour of your potion is wrong! Redo it!" Severus snapped out and Vanished the contents of Zedar's cauldron with a wave of his wand.

Harry had found it extremely enjoyable to play with the Potions Master, albeit in a manner so subtle that the man could not call him out for it. A smirk when a smile would have been more appropriate, allowing his natural arrogance to shine through, a challenging glance that was gone next moment, the bland, neutral tone...Oh yes, Severus Snape was quite fun to irritate, as he would get that crease in his forehead and that glare in his eyes...

When the man finally Vanished Harry's potion for being two shades off from the bright turquoise that the Swelling Solution was supposed to be, he must have expected Harry to react strongly. Instead, Harry merely nodded and started to prepare the ingredients all over again. Little did Snape know that Harry was used to this type of teaching style; his father, Aunt Bella, Uncle Lucius and Barty were all perfectionists. No matter what he did, as long as something was not perfectly correct, he was often told to redo it until it did become perfect. So Harry was not in the least surprised or indignant when Snape tried to use this method on him as well, although he did heave a mental sigh.

What he did not intended was for his reaction to have stirred a rather violent itch in one Severus Snape, who was determined to see the boy lose his temper. The trouble was, he did not know the boy well enough to deliver any verbal barbs on anything other than his performance in potions, which the boy usually accepted with a smirk and a, "Yes, sir," with the condescending 'if you say so,' implied but never spoken out loud.

All this served to frustrate Severus to no end; when the lesson finally ended, he floored back to his home in a fit of pique, ignoring Narcissa Malfoy's invitation for tea.

After one such potions lesson, Severus Snape stormed to the Headmaster's Office at Hogwarts to give his weekly report to the man who held his leash, one Albus Dumbledore. In a fit of anger

when the Dark Lord had killed his beloved Lily years ago, Severus had defected to the Light, where he was now as surely bound by his complicity as the Dark Mark used to bind him to the Dark Lord.

"The boy is absolutely infuriating," Severus snarled, pacing the floor of the cluttered Headmaster's office. "Draco and Theodore are of no help either; they sit there with a straight face, hiding their smirks behind their palms. I have half a mind to refuse to teach any of them!"

He looked up to see Dumbledore's eyes twinkling behind his half-moon glasses. "Now Severus, surely it can't be that bad. Your teaching methods have achieved much, er, respect from the students at Hogwarts. Surely Mr. Zedgar is no different." Severus settled for a glare, not deigning to answer.

Dumbledore sighed. "You know I must ask you to continue the lesson. The necessity of you remaining on good terms with Lucius Malfoy, especially now..." Severus nodded irritably, before scowling once more.

"Merlin, you should have seen his face!" Draco finally cracked up in the privacy of his room, while all Theo could do was to collapse on the lushly-carpeted floor in a fit of giggles. Harry looked down at his two friends innocently. "What? I didn't do anything? I was perfectly polite to Professor Snape the whole time." Draco almost choked on his own laughter at that statement, while Theo gasped out, "Yeah, and you were so polite that he could not find fault with your behavior, even though he knew you were purposely irritating him!"

Harry finally let out a laugh at that. "Well, I must admit, the man is quite fun to tease. I wonder if that's why Father keeps him around?" Draco shrugged slightly before suggesting slyly, "You could ask him?" Harry flopped down onto Draco's silk sheets and stared at his friend with mock-horror. "I never knew you were so sadistic, Malfoy. Do you want to see me strung up and whipped?"

Theo rolled until his chin rested in his elbow, "Nah, the Dark Lord won't do that to you; he dotes on you, anyone can see that." This time, Harry's shudder was not feigned. "True, but that doesn't prevent him from punishing me. You should see the marks I had from the last time I disobeyed him. I couldn't even speak properly for days; my voice was hoarse from all the screaming."

Draco said pointedly, "Well, don't disobey him then. Or at the very least, don't get caught doing it." Harry sighed at the last, "Well, my Occlumency is not at that stage yet, so Father always knows when I've been disobedient...Anyway, I must admit, I always deserve it when he does use the whip..."

"Has the Dark Lord ever cast the Cruciatus on you?" Draco asked in a small whisper. Harry shook his head. "So far, no. I've only experienced Aunt Bella's before, and that was during a lesson. But now that he's going to teach me the Dark Arts personally, I think that might change..."

Luckily for Harry, his words did not come true. While the Dark Lord was indeed a harsh taskmaster, he did not use any of the Unforgivables during their lessons. "You're not ready to learn them just yet, my son. If you keep up with your studies though, you will be ready by next summer." Harry had obediently nodded at the Dark Lord's answer on the subject, before readying himself for another round of learning. That summer, the Dark Lord no longer spent much time teaching Harry theory, expecting him to learn that on his own, now that he had fully understood the fundamentals. Instead, almost all of the two hours Harry spent every other night with his father was for practical lessons in the training room.

Other than Dark Curses and the practical usage of runes in Dark Magic, the Dark Lord also taught Harry the basics of non-verbal spells as well as wandless magic. While the first few lessons in the two was fraught with no little frustration, Harry persevered and by mid-August, he could cast most of the intermediate spells non-verbally, as well as perform basic wandless magic.

Harry recalled his particularly dismal performance during one duel...A jet of white light shot from the Dark Lord's wand, causing Harry to swiftly jump to the side even as he tried to gather his concentration to cast a non-verbal spell - his father had cast a Silencing charm on him, so that as much as he was tempted to do so, he could not vocalize any of his spells. Brows furrowed in concentration, he aimed his wand at his father and yelled the incantation for a stunning spell mentally. With a smirk, Harry watched elated as a thin jet of red light shot out of his wand...only to fizzle out into nothingness a few feet away from him! The Dark Lord took advantage of his opened-jaw surprise to send a hex Harry's

way, a hex which Harry did not managed to dodge - he hit the ground with a soft thud, cradling his chest and wincing. "Get up. We shall try this again." His father was as uncompromising as ever. With a muffled groan, Harry pushed himself to his feet and prepared for yet another harsh lesson...

"Your non-verbal spells are less powerful than your verbal ones; this is not acceptable. I want you to use only non-verbal spells for your lessons this year. With practice, you should be able to channel the same amount of power into them as with your verbal spells." The Dark Lord proclaimed at the end of the lesson. Panting exhausted on the ground, with his muscles aching and with bruises and cuts all over his body, Harry agreed glumly, foreseeing that he would have to put in a lot more effort during his lessons that coming year.

The last two weeks of summer, Harry was invited to stay over at Malfoy Manor. After learning what the underlying purpose of the visit was for, the Dark Lord allowed Harry to do as he wished. Having planned this with Draco, Harry had decided that it would be a two week camp (read: mingling session) for all his followers at both Durmstrang and Hogwarts. He sent carefully worded invitations to all the Night Serpents (save Ivan and Ekaterina) and first-year Slytherins that Draco counted as friends and allies. As a result, the attendance rate was truly phenomenal; only Kaspar Braun and Millicent Bulstrode, who were holidaying with their family, declined.

Thereafter followed the most enjoyable two weeks of Harry's summer; everyday, the group would spend the mornings playing Quidditch, swimming or other outdoor games, the afternoons learning fun things like dancing, singing, speech-making and other 'life skills' from an external instructor, and the night completing their holiday homework or practicing spells. It was during the last that Harry actually bonded more fully with his friends and followers; having long since completed his holiday homework, he often helped the rest with theirs, in those subjects in which he was competent in.

The first weekend, a visit was organized to Diagon Alley. Harry commandeered the services of a heavily disguised Barty Crouch Jr., Rabastan Lestrangle, Rodolphus Lestrangle and Evan Rosier to escort them to the shopping alley, all twenty-three students from Hogwarts and Durmstrang both.

Surveying all his companions, dressed in high-quality identical dark robes and conversing quietly amongst themselves, Harry supposed they were a sight to behold; a large group of twelve to fourteen years old teenagers behaving with impeccable manners, outlined against the colourful crowd and shops, standing perfectly postured on the cobblestoned pavements of the narrow alley. Certainly, as they strolled down Diagon Alley, they drew plenty of stares and pointed fingers.

Leading the group first to a rather deserted Flourish and Blotts, which nevertheless gave an impression of being highly cluttered due to the ceiling-to-floor book-shelves lining the wall and huge piles of books stacked into large piles littering the centre of the room. Harry led the way into the shop with a quiet command, "Fifteen minutes, then we proceed." Once inside, they split up into small groups to shop for their school books; Flourish and Blotts stocked books for both schools.

"I wonder if I'll be able to smuggle that to Hogwarts..." Theo eyed the book that Harry was holding thoughtfully. "Potentially Deadly Curses and Spells - Intermediate? You'll have a hard time getting this past Hogwarts' wards. Unless you plan to get your father to cast the concealing charm on it for you..." Harry raised an eyebrow in Theo's direction. Draco and Theo exchanged glances, then Draco swallowed and replied softly, "Umm, we thought you'd help us do it? Since well, you know we do not get any kind of education in the Dark Arts at school, and we'd hate to fall behind the Durmstrang students."

So, I seemed to have stirred their ambitious and competitive side with this camp of mine...Harry thought in amusement. Though he supposed Draco's words made sense. If they were to help the Dark Lord in his war, they must all be fully prepared when the time comes. "It'd look suspicious if a Hogwarts student bought this. Draco, you probably have a copy of this in your library at home, as well as many other similar ones. I'll help you get all of them spelled, then you and Theo can use them at Hogwarts. Though in return, I want you to teach the other Slytherins the spells when you've mastered them." Draco smiled, "We already have a study group, so that'll be no problem. Though I refuse to teach Vince and Greg." He ended with a small frown.

Harry snickered. "Don't worry, I'm not expecting miracles. Just give them some pointers when you're free. Theo, I'll leave them to you." Theo grumbled good-naturedly for a few moments before giving in.

As they were turning to leave the bookshop however, the door swung open and three boys and two girls entered with a rather dumpy looking red-headed woman. The first boy was tall, gangly and freckled, with red hair the same shade of the woman's as well as one girl, the second was chubby, with blood hair and bucked tooth, while the third boy had a cherubic face, wavy, dark auburn hair and deep hazel eyes which Harry noted was the same shape as his own.

Deeply shocked, Harry struggled to maintain his aristocratic mask even as Draco stepped forward and sneered, "Weasley, Longbottom and Granger. If you're wondering what that smell is, Harrison, a Mudblood just came in."

The last girl, a bushy haired brunette, flushed even as she glared at Draco with fierce eyes. Harry finally tore his eyes from the boy with eyes that reminded him of his own to turn his attention to the other children. His quick mind had already hinted to him as to who the boy might be, but Harry chose to ignore that portion of his mind for the time being as he focused on the others. These must be the Gryffindor students that Draco often complains about in his letters then...Maybe I should help him get some revenge...Harry mused. Regarding them coolly, Harry lifted an eyebrow. "Indeed. I must admit I was rather expecting someone with more of a presence, especially with that rather strong stench."

Theo and Draco chuckled delightedly, even as Harry clapped his hands twice. At once, all the students still remaining in the store turned towards Harry. "My friends, I must insist that those of you who are not yet done with your purchases do so with all haste. You see, there has been a rather unexpected filthy pollution of the immediate vicinity." He finished with a in the cold smirk in Mudblood girl's direction.

"Really now, there's no need for tha – " The dumpy looking woman tried to protest, but she was soon interrupted by a "Of course, Harrison. We have no desire, after all, to breathe in this stench." This came from Emlen, who was standing with Francis, Aleron and Alexei, and had immediately discerned his friend's intentions to

shame the girl. "Indeed." Alexei joined in with a haughty look of disdain on his face.

Aleron had turned to the shop assistant, indicating the books that all twenty-seven students had piled up and paid for at the counter. "Send all of these books, separately wrapped, to the Malfoy Manor latest by tomorrow noon."

Meanwhile, the bushy-haired girl had gave a loud wail and ran from the shop in tears. Harry looked on in amusement as the older woman tentatively moved to give chase, while the red-haired boy glared at Harry venomously. "Why you..." With a loud bellow, he flung himself at Harry, who coolly sidestepped his attack, leaving him sprawling on the floor when he overshot and fell. "Come, Draco, we'll leave this riff-raffs to their Muggle-like hobbies of attacking people physically." Harry sneered as he strode towards the exit. Draco fell in step beside him as he called out, "See you at Hogwarts, Weasel. Or better yet, don't turn up and save me the trouble."

Once outside, Harry exchanged amused, satisfied smirks with Draco. By Merlin, he had not played with anyone like that since school ended! Perhaps it was good that school was starting soon, after all, though he would miss Draco and Theo, since he would then have viable targets for his rather sadistic sense of humour.

By the way, I'm going to tweak the rules a little. I realized too late, Martin Potter, being born in October on the day Lily died, won't turn eleven until after school starts. And I'm guessing this means he shouldn't be attending Hogwarts till Harry is in year 3. Not too sure. In my country Singapore, school starts on January 1st, so generally, all students in one level will be born in the same year...But I'll be having Martin start school after this summer...And if you're wondering why I'm talking about Martin Potter all of a sudden, read the Flourish and Blotts scene again:)

Chapter Fourteen: Durmstrang Year Two Part I

September 1st arrived amidst a flurry of goodbyes. This year, Harry arrived at the port with Daphne, Aleron, Silas, and the Withers twins, as well as his new pet, currently curled up under his robes. A few weeks into July, Nagini had had a brood of hatchlings, of which she had presented the strongest to him. Harry had named the black-scaled baby serpent Nuit, thinking to use him as a mascot for his Dark Court of the Night, and had decided to bring him to school as his pet.

Along the way, as the Durmstrang ship stopped at ports all over Europe, most of the other members of Harry's Group joined them, making Harry thankful for choosing a large cabin this time. Soon, the cabin was almost full to the brim, with members sprawled all over the floor, benches and leaning against walls, conversing (for it was against etiquette to chatter) with each other, engaging in games of strategy (for it would be crass to just play chess or Exploding Snap), and generally having fun. Harry sat in the corner, conversing with Aleron and Silas, and generally watched with satisfaction as it seemed that his camp had achieved its goal of bonding the members together.

In the Group's deserted common room much later that night, Harry cast a strong privacy charm before turning to his second in command. "Aleron, I'm planning on keeping you as my second-in command, but I'm going to replace Ekaterina with Emlen. What do you guys think?"

"Thank you, Young Master." Aleron said softly before rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Emlen is a good candidate actually. He's popular and friendly, much like Ivan was. And he's level-headed and shrewd too, even if he hides it beneath that genial mask. He has the support of his year-mates, as well as most of the third-years."

Silas nodded. "But Ekaterina might be a problem, as might Ivan. The girl is not going to be happy that you replaced her with a second-year." Aleron furrowed his brows slightly at that, even as Harry's expression remained neutral. "Young Master, perhaps Ivan can be kept busy with his prefectural duties, all for the good of the Group, while Ekaterina...might be frightened into submission?" Harry's gaze was piercing as he considered his second's comments.

"Yes, she did strike me as the bull-headed type who cannot be bent, only broken. Aleron, I want you to think of ways to use Ivan's position for the benefit of our Group, as well as to keep an eye on him carefully. If he makes any suspicious overtures to other Groups, inform me at once." Aleron smirked, pleased with his task, then bowed, "Yes, Young Master."

"Silas, you will work with Emlen to recruit more talented second and third-years into our group, as well some of the new first-years. Also, you are to spare no effort to lure some talented Quidditch players to our Group. Leave Ekaterina to me; she is not to be touched." Harry's sharp gaze focused on his follower, wondering idly if Silas would take exception at being ordered around so commandingly. After all, Silas had always held back slightly when it came to serving him.

"Yes, Young Master." Came Silas' surprising and unhesitatingly reply. Harry raised an eyebrow. "Why the sudden use of honourifics?" Silas hesitated for a few seconds before kneeling down on one knee before Harry, in accordance with the pure-blood traditions that he had learnt as a child. "When Aleron first told me that he was going to serve you, I was stunned. I asked myself...what he saw in you, a child barely eleven. Even though I knew that you were no ordinary child, I allowed my pride to prevent me from following you fully. Before, I served you only because Aleron did. Over the past year however, I saw with my own eyes...how you gained yourself followers and status, even amid opposition. You have the makings of a great leader, Young Master, and I would be honoured to serve you if you'll have me."

Finally, Silas. You have finally made your decision. Harry eyed Silas coolly, hiding his amusement behind a neutral mask. "Swear it then, Silas, swear your loyalty to me and my Father. Without magic for now – when you come of age, I shall require an oath."

Silas raised his eyes to meet his leader's cold emerald green eyes, not even flinching when his leader's pet snake slithered onto the floor and started to hiss at him menacingly. "I, Silas Curtis Macnair, do swear my loyalty to Harrison Maximus Riddle and the Dark Lord, to take the former as my leader and young master, and the latter as my liege lord and master." Harry's eyes gleamed in amusement for a moment at how Silas had worded it; carefully, so as not to insult any of his two masters. In reality, Harry did not care whether his follower's ultimate loyalty was to him or his father. Since they had

the same goals, and Harry was content to remain subservient to his father, there was absolutely no conflict, as long as his followers served him too.

Lessons that year followed in much the same vein as the last, with Harry perpetually outdoing his classmates in most lessons. In the Dark Arts and Ancient Runes especially, the Professors found themselves so impressed that they approached Harry to see if he would be amenable to extra advanced lessons. Harry agreed to extra lessons from Rosier, but politely declined Fritz Ludwig's offer – his knowledge in Ancient Runes lay so much towards Dark Magic that even a professor of Durmstrang would be unduly alarmed. He was also fairly certain that, whatever Ludwig thought of his current abilities, his actual abilities lay far above that; after all, despite taking the class for students two years his elder, he barely had to study to maintain his position as top in his Ancient Runes class.

"A pity, Riddle! I know you have many other commitments, but what a pity! To allow a brilliant mind like yours to go untapped, unchallenged! Perhaps you'll change your mind? My offer's always open!" Professor Ludwig had sighed dramatically before waving Harry off. Thereafter, the professor made it a point to award Harry many points even for answering the simplest of questions, hoping perhaps, to entice Harry to take up his offer.

Professors at Durmstrang were unlike those at Hogwarts, if Draco's letters were anything to go by. From what Harry gathered, Hogwarts professors, save the Head of Houses, tended to keep to themselves when not teaching. At Durmstrang, professors involved themselves with the lives of those students whom they considered worthy of mentoring quite deeply. Professor Victoria Eastwood, for one, was always inviting Harry to tea in her office, giving him pointers and tips whenever Harry asked for it, while Professor Kai-zhong Lee always welcomed question-and-answer sessions with Harry. Since Harry had resolved never to come achieve anything less than second in Arithmancy again, Professor Lee's willingness to help was a huge boon to Harry.

Indeed, apart from Frederick Flint, most of the other professors seemed to adore, or at the very least, like Harry, something which irritated Brutus Gaius Flint to no end. His remarks became more and more acerbic, and he had taken to jinxing members of Harry's Group who went as yet unable to defend themselves (mostly first-years, the

new recruits), until, by mid-October, Harry decided that something had to be done about him.

As Brutus Flint had formed his own Group, Vermillion Sparks, since leaving the Golden Boys at the end of last year, Harry resolved that he would break not only Flint, but his Group as well. It would be just retribution indeed, Harry smirked viciously, for all the trouble that Flint has given me. But first, he would need...

"Daphne dear, can you make any one of the Vermillion Sparks spy for us? You may use any method you wish to." Harry told his friend, smiling at her fondly, even as he petted Nuit, who was currently curled up on his lap contentedly.

"Finally, a mission for me!" Daphne clapped her hands delightedly, before restraining herself, much to Harry's amusement. Smiling demurely, she replied gracefully, "Of course, Harrison. You may count on me; you'll have your spy by Halloween."

In the meantime, Harry ordered his Group members to move about the castles in groups of at least four; he also squeezed out time to teach all the first-years several spells to buy themselves enough time to run when cornered. After realizing that Harry was teaching the first-years, Daphne pouted and requested that Harry teach the second-years, a request to which Harry agreed with a groan. Henceforth, Harry found himself conducting two classes a week, the second consisting of both second and third-years Group mates, even as he maintained his practice of helping all second and third-year students who were not associated in any way with Flint's Group with their homework, whilst ordering Emlen and Francis to do the same for the first-years. This had the added effect of alienating the Vermillion Sparks Group even further, as none of the lower years wanted to lose Harry's help by associating with them.

Despite all his commitments, Harry still found time to train his new Quidditch team. Alexei was still a chaser and the Withers Beaters, but Harry had discovered that two fifth-year defectors from Maroon Wings, Yumika Honda and Cynric Cornstock, were excellent Chasers, and so they had replaced the Stockmann sisters. The Keeper position was played by the third-year Claus Schneider, who had improved tremendously over the summer, while Harry retained the position of Seeker.

After its phenomenal ascent in last year's rankings, the Night Serpents had received a lot of requests for memberships from other Group's members, predominantly from those who were Harry's fans, disenchanted with their current Group's leaders, or just plain ambitious. Harry had personally screened all candidates before allowing six into his Group; two fifth-years from Maroon Wings, one fourth-year and one sixth-year from Ivory Horns, one third-year from Checkered Knights and one fifth-year from Lavender Girls. Together with the four first-years, the Night Serpents now had twenty-eight members, a rather respectable size. Indeed, it grew so large that the common room was getting rather crowded whenever Harry called for full meetings.

"Harrison, maybe we should ask Cheng for a larger common room?" Daphne brought up during one meeting, eyeing the rather cramped common room and some of the members who had to seat on the floor. Shin-yan Cheng was the Potions professor who was also in charge of Groups logistics. Harry raised an eyebrow and stroked Nuit rhythmically. "Well then, Daphne my friend, perhaps you would like to do the honours then? Cheng is partial to you; we are sure that if you ask nicely, she will agree." Nuit raised his head and hissed in agreement, though Harry was not too sure if he knew what he was agreeing to. Daphne glared at Harry for a few moments, before curtsying and replying in a poisonously sweet voice, "As you wish then, my prince." A few people snickered and Harry winced; perhaps he should not have used the imperious sounding 'we' or allowed his sense of humour to get the better of him. It was widely known that while Cheng did indeed like Daphne and often asked her to tea, Daphne had developed a deep-seated dislike of the professor, and tried to avoid her as best as she could.

The title however, meant to be jokingly mocking, stuck. Harry became known, much to his slight chagrin, as the Prince of the Dark Court of the Night, or Prince of the Night Serpents. As titles went, it wasn't that presumptuous; the leader of the Blood Ravens was referred to by "High King", the leader of the Jade Talons by "Your Eminence", the leader of Maroon Wings by "Your Lordship" and even Flint insisted on being called "Excellency". It was a school tradition, but one that Harry had not bothered with the previous year, when he had first gained leadership - he thought it was rather pretentious, though that did not prevent him from utilizing the title to the best of his abilities when the title stuck.

The Night Serpents got their new common room by mid-November, and Harry soon put the next phase of his anti-Flint sub-plan into action. Having already won two Quidditch matches, one with the Brown Bears and one with the Azure Droplets, for relatively low stakes of a hundred points each, Harry now issued a challenge to the Vermillion Sparks.

"Brutus Gaius Flint, leader of the Bright Sparks of Flint. I, Harrison Maximus Riddle, Prince of the Dark Court of the Night, do hereby issue a Quidditch challenge. 500 Group points, to be determined by a win of 300 points lead." Harry stated formally one morning in the great hall. Only the full name of the Groups were used during formal declarations, and not the shortened, affectionate forms for everyday use. A smirk lit up Harry's features as he watched Flint come to the same conclusion that he had known he would – refusing the challenge of such a seemingly easy-to-win offer would make him look weak. Nuit, who had been curled around Harry's shoulders, started hissing at Flint.

"I, Brutus Gaius Flint, on behalf of the Bright Sparks of Flint, accept your challenge." Harry did not show the slightest hint of pain on his face when Flint tried to take advantage of the mandatory handshake to crush his hand. "Very good. We will meet you on the Quidditch pitch then."

With plans against the external threat moving along nicely, Harry once more concentrated on the internal one; one Ekaterina Anja Durov. She had been furious when he had replaced her with Emlen, pitching a fit and even insulting him in the corridor, in full view of several Jade Talons and Blood Ravens members. At that time, Harry had raised an eyebrow, and merely walked away. Since then, he had ordered his Group mates to alienate the girl, to not speak to her unless it was necessary; angered by her actions towards their Prince, all of them had obeyed. She could not change Groups either; she was loyal to Ivan, who was bound to the Dark Court of the Night until his tenure as Prefect ended. Ivan however, also had little time for her as he was caught up in his Prefect duties.

When Harry finally confronted the teenage girl one month into the cold shoulder treatment, the girl was near breaking point. "Why, Ekaterina, you look unwell. Do you need help with your homework?" Harry asked in a falsely sweet voice of concern as he indicated the

pile of books she had beside her on the table in the Library, where she had taken to hiding from the rest of her Group mates.

Dark circles surrounded her eyes and her pale face looked drawn and wan. Glaring at Harry with bloodshot eyes, she spat out, "What do you want, Riddle?" Harry shook his head. "Tsk, Ekaterina, is that any way to speak to your Group leader? You should show some respect...that is unless you want your life to be even more of a living hell than it currently is..." Harry's smirk was vicious as he contemplated the thought. His cold emerald eyes bore into hers

For a moment, Ekaterina's glare grew even stronger, then, she visibly deflated and started sobbing. Brokenly, she whispered, "What do you want, Riddle?" Harry smirked in triumph as Ekaterina broke. "Your full and public apology, Durov. As well as your word that you will not defy me in any way, big or small, ever again."

Ekaterina's humiliating, broken and very public apology the next day added a new dimension to Harry's reputation at Durmstrang – in addition to being an academic prodigy, a helpful peer-tutor and a worthy leader, he was also a scary enemy to have.

That was a fact which Flint found himself very aware of one cold, windy morning. Dressing in their bright orange Quidditch robes, Flint and six other members of the Vermillion Sparks were having a last minute discussion in the changing room before the match. A fourth-year, William Higgs, whom Flint had appointed vice-captain, was giving the team last minute advice. "We don't necessarily have to win the match; Riddle is a...good Seeker." He spat the last out, uncomfortable with complimenting the rival team. This was apparently targeted towards Calvin Delaney, who was their team seeker, in the same year as Harrison Riddle, but not particularly talented.

"We just have to make sure that the Night Serpents has less than a hundred and fifty points lead over us when they do catch the snitch. Clagg and I will target Riddle to ensure that he doesn't catch the Snitch if they are more than a hundred and fifty points up." Flint added stonily, glaring at his year-mates, daring them to object. When everyone nodded agreement, all trooped out onto the Quidditch pitch.

Flint was slightly surprised by the large turnout. What with over a dozen Quidditch matches being held each school year, very few outside the immediate competing Groups usually came to watch, unless of course, one of the Groups was the Maroon Wings, who had the star Seeker Krum as their player. Today however, almost half the school population had turned up.

Well, he would just have to make sure that his team won then. Flint scowled slightly as he faced Riddle. "Captains, shake hands." The referee was Professor Eastwood, who had apparently been interested enough in the match that she had volunteered to take over from the usual referee, Frederick Flint. Flint gripped Riddle's hand tightly, annoyed when Riddle's expression showed no hint of the mangling grasp that Flint subjected him to.

Then, it was kickoff time. Immediately, Flint worked with Clagg to send the Bludgers at the opposing team's Chasers, though they were hampered time and again by the Withers brothers. Flint snarled. He hated to admit it, but the twins were good. Perhaps it was some effect of their being twins, but the two worked extremely well in tandem; it was like one would merely have to think of an act or ploy, and the other would follow his lead perfectly. After many rounds of being hampered at every turn by the twins, Flint noted with alarm that the Night Serpents' chasers had managed to use this opportunity to score.

"Hundred to twenty, in favour of the Night Serpents." The commentator announced cheerily, even as Flint swore. He needed a change of tactics...Signaling for a time-out, he landed and started barking orders at his team-mates. "Delaney, catch the Snitch before the Night Serpents can get any more of a lead – half the school's here and we'll look bad if we win merely on a technicality, I want a clear win of the match. Higgs, I want you to stop the goals or die trying. And you three – " He turned to glare at his three chasers. "Mark their chasers if you have to, throw them off the broom, something! Start scoring or else!"

The next half of the match was the dirtiest that Flint had ever played, or even seen played, against any opponent. His Chasers blocked the Night Serpents' at every possible turn, he swung his bat at Honda and Cornstock on three separate occasions (Krum was too fast for him), managing to catch Cornstock across the chest. Piiiipp! The sound of Professor Eastwood blowing the whistle made Flint

scowl as the Night Serpents' star Chaser, Alexei Krum, put away another penalty, the latest in the series of seven, bringing the score to a hundred and eighty to thirty.

Flint was desperate; if Riddle caught the snitch now, the Night Serpents would have won. Signaling to his team mates, a glint lit up his eyes. Oh yes, Riddle won't know what hit him...He grinned maliciously as he put his last plan into action. All of a sudden, all the Vermillion Sparks players, with the exception of the Keeper, flew towards Riddle, aiming to surround and mob him...

Harry smirked when he saw all the opposing team's players suddenly fly towards him. He just knew that Flint would try something like that. Unfortunately, Flint's move really came at an inopportune time, for Harry had, moments ago, just seen the snitch at the Vermillion Sparks end of the goalpost – on the opposite side of the pitch as to where he was at the moment.

Harry sighed. Well, he would just have to allow his deeply buried Gryffindorish instincts out to play this time then...When they were barely fifty metres from him, suddenly, he bent forward, aimed his broom, a Nimbus Two Thousand and One that Aunt Bella and Uncle Rodolph had given him for his birthday this year, and shot off. Straight at two of the opposing team's Chasers, who, with wide-eyed terror, veered off immediately. Harry supposed they had seen enough of his matches on the Quidditch pitch to know that he was not bluffing when it came to flying. Unfortunately, their sudden careening off when the rest of their team mates were so close caused them to crash into the other beater, Clagg. Harry smirked as Flint, who was the nearest to him, bellowed and aimed his broom at him.

Turning to outfly him, Harry was suddenly stopped by an unexpected figure who had swerved in front of him to block him; the Vermillion Sparks' Seeker, Calvin Anthony Delaney. Swearing slightly under his breath, Harry's broom was almost clipped by Flint; at the last moment, Harry spun a cork screw in midair, causing Flint to miss him by mere inches. Not giving his opponents time to recover, Harry pulled out of the corkscrew with his broom's trajectory aimed straight at Delaney; he then shot forward.

Delaney screamed as Harry, at the last instant, tilted his broom slightly, so that he passed by in front of Delaney, over the handle of

his Cleansweep Seven, instead of crashing into the player himself. Without looking back, Harry dived, shooting forward at the speed of a comet, until he was so close that that he could see Higgs' teeth. Then, with a triumphant smirk, he pulled out from his dive inches short of Higgs with a weakly fluttering snitch in his left hand.

"Three hundred and fifty to thirty!" The commentator yelled the final score as Harry smiled at his team-mates; they had, apparently, taken advantage of the opposing team's preoccupation with Harry to score twice more. Others might have thought it rather cold of them, but the fact was that Harry had ordered them to do just that; as he had an inkling of what Flint planned to do, thanks to his spy within the Vermillion Sparks' ranks.

Once he landed, Flint cursed bitterly as he glared at Harry with anger and loathing in his eyes. "Riddle, I challenge you to a Wizards' Duel!" As soon as the words left his mouth, a dawning realization that he had just challenged the academic prodigy to a duel crept up, leaving Flint cursing once more, silently, this time at his own stupidity. Maybe Riddle won't accept? Flint thought hopefully.

That hope, however, was soon dashed when Riddle smirked that irritatingly smug smirk of his, and smoothly replied, "Very well, Flint." In accordance with traditions, Harry delivered an elegant half-bow even as he spoke the words of acceptance, "I, Harrison Maximus Riddle, accept your challenge. As the party challenged, I invoke my right to choose the place and audience - the Duelling Arena of Durmstrang Institute with invitation to the duel open to all who choose to attend. My second will be Aleron Fidel Mulciber."

Flint snarled menacingly, "My second will be Boris Emilev Pavlov. Wands only, Wednesday of the week after the Christmas holidays, four in the afternoon." He knew Riddle had his fourth-year Transfiguration classes then, with his relative Frederick Flint. If Riddle accepted, there was no doubt that Professor Flint would make his life hell, for he would have to skip lessons to attend the duel. Flint allowed a smirk to cross his face at the thought that he had outsmarted Riddle. Riddle eyed him with an unreadable gaze before inclining his head in acceptance.

Little did Flint know that Harry was not bothered in the least by the possible trouble he might get into. I will give you this small victory, Flint. Then I will crush you like the insect you are.

Right, er, I hope this chapter met everyone's expectations! I'm not into sports, and have a very poor grasp of strategy, so I hoped my Quidditch scene was portrayed realistically enough:)

Chapter Fifteen: Durmstrang Year Two Part II

That year, Harry returned to the Manor for Christmas holidays. Despite the Dark Lord being busy with plans for gaining more followers, making more allies and plotting cunning moves to entrap Order of the Phoenix members to get rid of them subtly (for he was as yet unready to reveal his return to the world), Voldemort still found time for his son.

"How is your non-verbal magic progressing, Harry?" Voldemort made idle conversation as he played chess with Harry in front of the library fireplace on Christmas Eve morning, his left hand idly stroking a dozing Nagini. Harry winced and shrugged slightly, "As well as it can be. I am using it in my classes, but it's still rather weak as compared to my verbal spells. Although I am able to cast them eventually, it takes more tries to cast the new spells that I learn correctly. Voldemort looked at Harry thoughtfully. "Do the teachers give you any trouble over this?"

Harry frowned slightly, "Most of them are unaware that I'm trying to cast spells non-verbally. I say the spell every so often in my attempts, to throw them off trail. Rosier knows, of course, but he gives me the space I need. The other teachers just think I'm slowing down my pace of learning this year...but since I usually get the spells by the end of the lesson, there's nothing they can say to that. Except for the Transfiguration professor, who uses the excuse to take points." Scowling darkly at the last, Harry prodded his knight forward, only to wince as his father's bishop took his knight.

"Surely your classmates know of your attempt at non-verbal spells." Voldemort commented. Harry nodded. "Yes, however, my partners are usually Aleron and Silas or Septimus and Octavius. And they know better than to reveal my secrets." Voldemort smirked at the last, before frowning. "Ah yes, you mentioned that the twins have also pledged their loyalty to you. You told them that you were my heir?"

Harry winced slightly. "I know you told me not to reveal that without your expressed approval, but they already suspected since last year, when I punished Aleron in front of them. Aleron had to tell them about him serving me. They know I speak Parseltongue and they live in Britain; they know that Mister Mulciber is a suspected Death Eater, and they were smart enough to put everything together.

There have been hints, after all, of your return, though the Ministry is foolish enough to overlook the signs. Then, when I saved Septimus by shoving a bezoar down his throat after he consumed an expired Calming Draught, courtesy of one of his enemies, he decided he owed me a life debt, and the twins pledged themselves to me." Meeting his father's gaze wryly, Harry accused, "You're going to punish me for my disobedience, aren't you?" Seeing the glint in his father's eyes, Harry just sighed resignedly. "How are you going to punish me for this, Father?"

Voldemort smirked in sadistic amusement. "You know, I had the most interesting question from Karkaroff the other day...about how Durmstrang uses corporal punishment, and whether it should be allowed on my heir...something about how the Transfiguration professor would most certainly attempt to use it on you." He paused, taking in Harry's half-hearted scowl, before continuing, "Shall we see how you'd react to it? Hold out your right hand, Harry." Voldemort conjured a cane out of thin air, a long black coloured one. He watched with amusement as Harry looked like he wanted to argue for a few moments, before holding out his hand resignedly.

"Yes, sir." Harry raised his arm so that his hand, palm facing up, was held at around his chest level. Holding his fingers together tight, he made sure that his thumb was tucked close to his palm, presenting tight, solid flesh for his father's cane. Truth be told, he could not find it in himself to resent his father for the punishment, as he had indeed disobeyed his father, and it was in his father's nature to be sadistically cruel.

Three solid blows later, Harry's palm was a pale white with three angry red marks across it, turning purple in some areas. Harry's hand felt like it had been pushed into a frying pan and jolts of pain shot up his arm. It hurt, horribly so, and it was all Harry could do not to cry out. It was demeaning too, to be struck with an implement Muggle-style, rather than a hex or curse. Staring at his hand, Harry wondered if he would be able to maintain his stoic demeanor if Frederick Flint decided to use this particular punishment on him – he resolved to work harder on his facial expressions.

"Sit down Harry. Let's continue our game." Voldemort gestured to the chessboard. Harry suppressed a groan as he realized that his father expected him to play with his hand feeling like it was buried in molten lava. Even if his body was extremely quick at healing, it

would still hurt for some time without any salve for the wounds. "You're evil, Father. Maybe I won't give you your Christmas present after all." Harry grumbled, knowing full well that he would do no such thing. He heaved a mental sigh as he continued to play against his father, knowing that he would no doubt get severely thrashed. Still, despite the pain and his soon-to-be defeat, he wouldn't trade this precious time he had with his father for the world.

After the holidays, during which Harry had co-organized the traditional Hogwarts-Durmstrang Christmas party with Draco, Harry returned to school in an extremely light mood.

'Massster, you ssseem to be very happy...' Nuit hissed at Harry, peeking out from beneath Harry's blankets. 'Well Nuit, tomorrow I'm going to crush Flint once and for all.' Nuit flicked his tongue out curiously. 'The big child? Can I eat him after Massster isss done?' Harry laughed and shook his head. Flicking a finger at Nuit playfully, Harry scolded lightly, 'Nagini brought you lotsss of food during the Christmasss holiday, you can't be hungry already.'

Unlike normal snakes, magical serpents like Nagini and Nuit could survive for weeks without sustenance. Harry was glad, for it meant that he did not have to bring Nuit hunting often. While many in the school knew of his pet snake, he was not ready to reveal that he could speak Parseltongue just yet – that would happen only at a later stage of his plans. Currently, only Aleron, Silas, the twins and Daphne knew of his little secret.

The next afternoon, Harry ate lightly during tea time, not wishing to duel on a full stomach. He had asked the Head Girl, Mira Georgieva Draganov of Blood Ravens, to be the referee. Since formal duels were not forbidden at Durmstrang, the Head Girl had readily agreed, as it was the duty of the Head Girl and Boy to preside over duels.

When Harry arrived at the large, domed-ceiling Dueling Arena with Aleron, he was mildly surprised at the turnout, which was as large as it had been at the Quidditch match. More than half of the wooden benches lining the white-washed, circular Arena's walls were filled. He supposed many were interested in his capabilities, since there was no other reason why there should be such a large audience for a duel between two second-years. While Harry had initially planned for his duel to be witnessed by many, he had not expected this much of a turnout. Indeed, even some professors were there; Eastwood,

Rosier and Karkaroff. Harry supposed the Highmaster did not want Voldemort breathing down his neck should anything happen to Harry, so he was there to make sure Harry was safe.

"Duelists, bow to each other." Draganov instructed crisply. Eyes never leaving Flint, Harry bowed slightly, watching as Flint did the same. Then, as their seconds were instructed to retreat to the side for the time being, the duel begun.

"Entomorphis!" Flint shouted at Harry, aiming a hex meant to turn Harry into an insect at him. For a moment, Harry was slightly surprised by Flint's knowledge of a hex beyond his year, then concluded that Professor Flint had probably taught him this transfiguration-based hex. So, you've been getting tutoring huh, Flint? I'll have you know that it won't be enough...

Harry dodged the hex easily enough, sending back a jelly-fingers curse, aimed to make Flint drop his wand. "Fio jellicus!" Flint, moving quickly for someone his size, dodged that and aimed another spell at Harry. "Densaugeo!"

"Protego!" Harry lazily cast a shield charm with a flick of his wand. How Flint thought that would deter Harry, he did not know – maybe he thought that Harry's teeth increasing in size meant that he would not be able to enunciate spells properly?

Hmm, maybe I should show him my non-verbal spells then...Harry mused. His goal today was not to defeat Flint after all (for after training with the Dark Lord for two months, how can a second-year be his match?), but to do so in a way as to tear whatever was left of Flint's reputation to shreds. And the only way to do that, Harry knew, was to toy with Flint.

"It appears as if your spells are a little too weak, Flint," Harry taunted softly, casting a non-verbal jelly-legs jinx at Flint. Flint, distracted by Harry's words, and not hearing Harry say a single spell, was caught by the jinx. "What the hell!" Flint exclaimed as his legs started wobbling uncontrollably, ending in him crashing to the floor before he cancelled the curse with a muttered, 'Finite Incantetum. '

"Hell is what you're going to experience, Flint," Harry sneered as he sent a trip jinx at Flint. Just as Flint was getting to his feet, he fell again, this time with his face flat against the cold stone floor, to the

amused laughter of the audience. Smirking, Harry laughed cruelly, "Were you too scared to stand properly, Flint? Here, let me help you up. Mobilicorpus."

Harry waved his wand in an intricate motion, maneuvering Flint's body so that it stood awkwardly, obviously not of his own volition. With another smirk, Harry cancelled the spell, even as the audience roared with laughter. Students, Harry mused gleefully, can be rather thoughtlessly cruel at times.

Watching as Flint's face turned an ugly shade of puce, Harry was ready when Flint screamed out, "Tarantallegra! Tarantallegra!" Harry laughed as he sidestepped the two spells, aimed to entrap him, easily. "Is that the best that you can do, Flint? Let me teach you a few spells, shall I?"

"Diffindo. Furnunculus. Impedimenta. Incendio!" Harry cast three separate spells at Flint in succession, aiming at Flint, his left and his right, ensuring that he could not side-step any of the spells. Flint eyes widened as he cast a hasty shield charm, "Protego!" However, the shield that he conjured was weak and brittle; it broke when the severing curse struck it, leaving Flint unable to react in time to the Furnunculus curse that came after, since to step to the right would put him in danger of being bound and to step to the left would put him in danger of being burned.

Flint's screams filled the air as angry red boils appeared on his skin. Harry smirked and stalked closer. "Levicorpus." A flash of white light, then Flint was dangling upside down from his ankles, his robes sliding to show the hairy trunks of his legs. Eww, that was a sight I could do without...

"Flint, Flint, Flint. Had enough? Do you wish to surrender now?" Harry mocked, twirling his wand ever so slightly. Even though Flint still had his wand with him, Harry was not afraid as he knew that Flint would not know how to free himself. Though he may still cast a curse at Harry...

"Never!" Flint yelled, "Entomorphis!" Harry sighed as he dodged the spell with his lightning quick reflexes. "Silencio. You're giving me a headache, Flint, with your banshee-like voice." He taunted Flint for another thirty seconds, before turning to the Head Girl reluctantly. All good things, alas, has to come to an end. Harry enquired politely,

"Miss Draganov, since Flint is clearly unable to continue the match, would you pass judgement?"

"Very well." Mira Draganov nodded. "As Brutus Gaius Flint has been silenced, trussed up, and is unable to continue dueling, given that he has shown no indication of any ability at non-verbal spells, Harrison Maximus Riddle is hereby declared the winner of this duel. Do you, Boris Emilev Pavlov, as Flint's second, wish to contest this result?" The fifth-year shook his head and frowned as he eyed Harry speculatively; he was aware that facing Harry would be a suicidal move on his part, both for his health and political future's sake.

Harry smirked as he watched Pavlov lead Flint away, as his own second came up to congratulate him. "A very nice show, my prince. We were extremely impressed," Aleron stated with a wide smile, obviously happy for his leader. "Yes, Prince, it was very hilarious," Emlen clapped Harry on the shoulder, grinning happily. "Francis and I were laughing throughout the duel." All the second-years had turned up for Harry's duel it seemed, for it was currently their free period.

"Thank you." Harry returned Emlen's grin. "It was an enjoyable...exercise." He allowed his eyes to rove towards the other spectators, some of whom were calling out to him with praises.

"Good job, Mr. Riddle," this was from Professor Rosier, a compliment Harry acknowledged with a small bow.

"Yes, your skills are quite remarkable, Mister Riddle." Professor Karkaroff added, his manner oily and smooth. Harry inclined his head coldly; he disliked insincere flattery immensely, although he was too polite to show it. Karkaroff hovered for a moment before smiling at Harry and stalking off.

"Well guys, much as I enjoy basking in the after-glow, Aleron and I have to face the music now." Seeing the second-years' confusion Harry smiled wryly, "We practically skipped Transfiguration class for this duel." Most of the second-years stared at Harry in disbelief, even as Korbin whistled.

"Wow, Harrison, you must have a death wish, to skip Professor Flint's class to duel his relative." Korbin cheerfully commented. Harry

acknowledged Korbin's comments with a wry tilt of his head, before leaving the Dueling Arena with Aleron in tow.

Needless to say, Frederick Flint was furious. He assigned Harry and Aleron detention, took a hundred points from the Night Serpents, and told Harry that, as the instigator, he would be caned later that night. Harry took it in stride, though he had to shoot Aleron a glare to stop the latter from protesting.

"Professor Flint? It's Riddle, reporting for detention." Harry knocked on the door of Flint's office politely, his face a bland mask. Upon a curt command, Harry entered the office, noting that Frederick Flint preferred old-fashioned and handsome furniture, and he also had a large collection of books.

Remaining silent, Harry met Flint's gaze calmly as the man glared daggers at him. At last, Professor Flint deigned to speak. "So, Riddle. You thought you could skip my class with impunity, in order to take part in some childish duel? You'll soon find out what happens to delinquents, Riddle..." Harry had asked his father not to order Karkaroff to step in, for he did not wish anyone to know of his special hold over the Highmaster just yet, so he resigned himself to taking Flint's punishment.

As much as he disliked the professor, he knew that etiquette required him to offer an apology, since the fault, after all, had been his. However, not wishing to be accused of trying to worm his way out of punishment, Harry decided to save it for later.

"You will be caned three times across each palm, Riddle. One for every ten minutes you were absent from my class." Flint said harshly, conjuring up a swishy cane from nowhere. Tamping down on his urge to hex the professor, Harry replied evenly, "Yes, Professor." He braced himself as best as he could and offered up his left palm in the appropriate position.

Frederick Flint narrowed his eyes as he contemplated the boy in front of him. Never before had a child as young as this not pleaded and begged for lenience, so Frederick rarely assigned caning as a punishment to students this young. He wondered if this was a trick of sorts, though Riddle did not seem like the type to play pranks, before taking in the neutral expression of the child and deciding that yes, the boy was apparently quite sincere.

Raising the cane, he swished it in the air experimentally; Frederick found that this usually served to frighten the student more. He was disappointed when Riddle gave no visible reaction, so he started the punishment immediately.

Thwack! The first blow landed smack in the middle of Riddle's palm, turning first pink, then red with pale white edges surrounding the stroke. In Frederick's long experience, the first stroke usually elicited some reaction in even the most hardened, whether it be a cry or a flinch, or even a loud yell – yet the boy showed none. Frowning slightly, Frederick kept his eyes on the boy's face as he brought the cane down hard again, this time, on a rather bony part of the hand just below the fingers. A small spark of pain flashed across emerald green eyes before disappearing just as swiftly. Again, the boy did not make any sounds.

When he delivered the third blow, he laid it over the first, wondering if the higher level of agony would cause a reaction – this time, he noticed the boy clench his other hand, even as his face remained expressionless. Very good self-control...Frederick acknowledged sourly.

"The other hand." He watched as Riddle slowly withdrew his left hand, no doubt due to the throbbing agony. Sometimes, by this point, students would break down sobbing at the thought of having to submit to the same on the other palm – many, cursing and shouting, refused point-blank to offer their other hand. Frederick would then have no choice but to change the punishment to some other thing; he was, after all, not a cruel man.

Riddle, however, continued to astonish him. He offered his right hand in the same manner he had his left – quietly and with dignity. Frederick did not draw out the strokes this time; Riddle had earned that much from him at least. Thwack, thwack, thwack! And it was over. Riddle lowered his hand slowly, waiting for dismissal, his face still a neutral as it had been when he first entered the room. Frederick reluctantly conceded that he was impressed by the way Harry had held himself throughout the punishment. "You may go, Riddle."

Harry used his considerable Occlumency skills to suppress his overwhelming urge to curse the man, as well as to bury the pain he

felt behind tightly locked shields. Although his hand would be fully healed in at most a half hour's time, as his magic was already healing the non-magical wounds quickly, that did not mean, however, that the humiliation of the punishment had faded. One day, I swear, one day. Frederick Flint will pay. Unfortunately, before he could leave, he still owed the man an apology. Inclining his head slightly, Harry spoke, "I apologize, professor, for my ill-mannered action this afternoon," before he turned to leave the room.

Behind Harry, Frederick Flint's jaws dropped in surprise.

School life picked up again after Harry's memorable duel and subsequent punishment. Making use of the sudden popularity that the duel had given him (whereby most students now saw Harry as a celebrity of sorts), Harry put into place plans that would help him run for Prefect this year. He continued helping all the lower-year students up to fourth year, ordering all his Group members to do the same – this gained him and his Group popularity and respect. Very soon, almost all lower-year students were referring to him affectionately as the "Prince of Serpents" or "Dark Prince", not only those in his group.

As Easter rolled around, Ivan surprised everyone by voluntarily stepping down from his Prefect position, not wishing to run for a second year – apparently, he had taken one look at Ekaterina's plight and decided that he did not wish to suffer the same fate as her. Looks like loyalty isn't worth much to Ivan, Harry thought disgustedly. Foolish, really. A leader should always take care of his own...

Harry was thus free to focus all his energies on consolidating his support. When the results came out, Harry was delighted to learn that he had come in third place, merely behind two candidates from the Blood Ravens and Jade Talons group. It was official – Harry was the youngest Prefect to be elected in a century; he was now considered by many to be a prodigy in every sense of the word.

Harry spent Easter break as he usually did – studying and generally enjoying himself at Malfoy Manor with Draco, and occasionally Theo who dropped by pretty often. That Easter, his father had gone out of the country with Bellatrix and some other Death Eaters, so Harry went to live at Draco's house instead, rather than return home to an empty house (aside from all the house-elves). It made him quite grateful that his father had, before Harry started first-year, changed

the Hogwarts' (by ordering Lucius to influence the Hogwarts Board of Governors) and Durmstrang's (by ordering Karkaroff to do so) school terms to match - school started on September 1st, with two weeks of Christmas break during the last two weeks of December. The second term begun again after the New Year, then ended around the second week of March for Easter, while the last term begun after two weeks of Easter break, and ended in the last week of May. Summer holidays now lasted three months instead of two. Harry knew his father's decision was in no way altruistic. Judging by how his last summer had gone, his father only increased the length of his holidays so that he could have Harry attend lessons of his own designing...as such, Christmas and Easter were Harry's only true holidays in the year.

After the Easter break, Harry received tentative offers of alliance from the Jade Talons, who were hoping to oust the Blood Ravens after many years playing second fiddle to them. After a short discussion with Aleron and Emlen, Harry refused their offer, an action which earned their animosity. Still, they apparently decided not to act so close to examinations, so Harry enjoyed the rest of the school year in peace, finally able to concentrate on his studies.

Poring all his time and effort into his weakest subjects, he nevertheless found time to revise for his few stronger subjects.

The final week after examinations, Harry spent time bonding with his room-mates. Then, on a spur of the moment decision(though this time he made sure to ask for his father's permission first), he decided to reveal his Parseltongue ability, demonstrating it on Nuit. All of his room-mates gaped in surprise; Korbin was the first to recover. "That- that is just so cool! Wicked, Harrison."

Emlen remarked dryly, "You really are a 'Prince of Serpents', aren't you, my prince?" His shrewd gaze told Harry that he was beginning to put two and two together – Parseltongue was, after all, an extremely rare ability which only one wizard was known to possess. Added to the fact of some of the fourth-year students' exceptional level of subservience, the Christmas party, the summer camp at the Malfoys...well, Emlen was no fool. Alexei too, regarded Harry for a long moment before commenting, "Thank you for trusting us with this knowledge, my prince." Francis merely looked back and forth between everyone before frowning in confusion.

Harry merely smirked. "Take the holidays to think about it, everyone. I am not expecting anything now."

When the examination results came out, Harry was elated. He was top in all but two subjects; Transfiguration and Potions. No more Arithmancy lessons with Uncle Rody...

And so, the school year ended on a light note for Harry and his friends.

Since corporal punishment used to be allowed in Hogwarts, I'm just going to assume that Durmstrang still keeps this tradition, since there's no interfering Dumbledore here to outlaw it.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter, bye for now:)

Chapter Sixteen: Decision

This summer, Harry was again only allowed one week of relative relaxation, during which he completed all his homework, before he was once more plunged into extra lessons in Potions and Transfiguration. Harry spent that one week generally lazing about with Draco and Theo, while studying with Aleron and Silas.

"I want to hear all about your duel, Harrison." Draco pounced on Harry as soon as he entered Harry's room one day. Laughing, Harry allowed himself to be pressed into the dark silk sheets of his bed. "Get off me and I'll tell you...if you tell me the full story of how you caused Weasley and Potter to be almost suspended."

"Deal." Draco drawled, moving to hug a pillow in a sitting position. Theo stretched out luxuriously on his side and smiled, "Come on, Harrison, don't tease." Laughing once more, Harry told them the entire story, ending with a, "So now, Flint is finished. His Group disbanded as soon as he lost the duel – it was a major loss of face for them. Flint had to beg the Group who finished last, the Brown Bears to take him in, no other Groups were willing to do so." Draco and Theo both laughed richly at that.

"Our turn." Draco begun. "Well, it started innocently enough. A few insults, as usual, during breakfast." Harry snorted at that; Draco was never the innocent party. Theo took up the story, "One thing led to another and Draco here decided to challenge Weasley to a duel. Secretly of course, since duelling's banned at Hogwarts, unlike at your school." The last was said with a wry shrug.

Draco smirked. "Well, the Gryffindors didn't care about rules, did they? At first, I thought I'd sic Filch on them, but then I decided to be kind. Weasley appointed your brother as his second; I thought he would choose Longbottom." Theo cast Draco an amused glance. "Since when are you kind? You merely wanted to kill two birds with one stone. Draco here kidnapped Longbottom to the trophy room the same night, casting spell on his hair to turn it platinum blond. He immobilized him, then sat back and watched as Weasley and Potter, thinking it was Draco, started hexing Longbottom. The professors caught them and gave them a month's worth of detentions; I heard Severus tried to push for suspension."

Harry raised an eyebrow, "They attacked without warning? Not very Gryffindorish of them hmm?" Draco smirked. "Well, I might have called Weasley's and Potter's mother some rather unsavoury names during breakfast..." Harry shook his head, a glint of warning in his eye. "I hope you were insulting Potter's step-mother and not my mother." He had come to terms with the fact that the boy with eyes similar to his own was his younger brother, currently a Hogwarts first-year in Gryffindor House, and had dismissed the boy as inconsequential, with no relevance to him. After all, he had only seen the boy once in his entire life, for five minutes in a bookstore. He was, to put it mildly, rather indifferent to the boy...or so he told himself.

Draco raised his hands, "Hey, I wouldn't dare to do that, my prince." The last was said slyly, with a smug smirk on his lips.

Harry groaned at that, knowing he was bound for days of teasing. "Who told you about that?" Draco's smirk widened, "A Slytherin never reveals his sources, Harrison."

Late one afternoon, Harry was searching fervently in his father's library. He was searching amongst the huge, dark mahogany shelves that were interspersed throughout the enormous room, second largest in the manor save for the throne room, for promising books...books which would contain a solution to the threat he currently faced from the Transfiguration Professor, Frederick Flint. The punishment he had faced at the teacher's hands had been the last straw, as far as Harry was concerned. Flint had gone too far. He was a threat to Harry's influence and power. It wouldn't do, after all, for the dark heir to be pushed around like the professor had been doing to him. For his first two years at Durmstrang, he had laid low and endured, but next year, next year would be different. Since he had been elected as a Prefect, more avenues were now open to him...but first, he had to deal with Frederick Flint.

And Harry was reluctant to use Karkaroff to do it, even though he knew that one word in the Highmaster's direction and Flint would be fired. But somehow, victory in such a form would feel hollow to Harry - he wanted the Professor to bow, whether knowingly or unknowingly, to his power. Harry wished for his hands to be the ones that crushed the professor, even if the professor did not know it. After hours of wandering amongst the many bookshelves in the library, Harry gave up and headed for the backmost shelves in the

library. Upon those shelves stood books about the darkest of the Dark Arts - blood magic, sacrificial magic, necromantic magic and many more obscure branches of the Dark Arts that the average wizard on the street did not even know the existence of. It was the last place where Harry wanted to search, for he knew he was as yet unready to delve into those mysteries, a prodigy though he might be...yet, it was here that he spotted a promising tome. Black leather cover with silver bindings. A title that seemed innocuous, but held the promise of more. And to top it off, it was written in Parseltongue, which meant that Harry was one of the two people in Britain, and possibly the world, to be able to read it. Heaving the book into his hand, Harry shrunk it before he started to search for more books...

Once the week was up, Voldemort informed Harry that he would be speeding up Harry's Potions and Transfiguration lessons as he wanted them completed by Harry's birthday. As a result, Harry now attended Potions lessons at Malfoy Manor three times a week, causing Snape to develop an ulcer (or so Draco revealed to him one day). Harry had smirked – he did love toying with the greasy-haired Potions master.

That summer, Harry also discovered that he had undergone a minor growth spurt. One morning, while choosing a robe for the day, he had been mildly surprised to realize that what had been the correct length the previous summer was suddenly two inches shorter. Casting a height revealing spell, he was pleasantly surprised to learn that he stood at five foot three. His once thin frame had begun to fill out slightly – Harry made it a point to exercise daily, not wishing to grow fat; his mind flashed on Peter Pettigrew, the fat wizard who Harry had met once and took an instant dislike to. Not including the fact that he had once betrayed Harry's biological parents, he was just too much of a coward for Harry's taste. Self-preservation was fine and all, but once the line was crossed...Harry looked down on cowards.

Luckily for Pettigrew, despite the fact that the Death Eaters used the Manor for meetings, the common Death Eaters were never allowed past the throne room – and Harry was forbidden to step foot in that room. Only the most trusted of the twenty-odd Inner Circle members were allowed in the Manor proper, and Pettigrew had not attained that status.

Despite Voldemort being extremely busy that summer, he still found time to train Harry, finally teaching Harry what he had wanted to learn since he found out about the Dark Arts – the Unforgivable Curses.

"Happy birthday, Harry. You turn thirteen today; you're no longer a young child. I will start teaching you what you have been asking from me since you first delved into the Dark Arts – the Unforgivable Curses." Voldemort watched his son's reactions carefully. Despite Harry's attempt to keep his reactions restrained to a smile and a polite nod, his emerald eyes shone with joy and exuberance. Then, deciding that he probably wasn't fooling his father anyway, Harry threw all restraint to the winds and grinned.

"Thank you, Father! This is best birthday present I've ever had." Harry truly was eager to learn about the high level curses. Despite its name, whatever the Dark Arts class taught at Durmstrang was barely on the side of Dark magic, for Durmstrang was still a school, which had to cater to the students' abilities. And the true Dark Arts required a level of dedication and talent that most students simply did not have. Therefore, most of Harry's Dark Arts education still came from Bellatrix, Voldemort or self-study (when he was in school).

Voldemort smirked, "You might not say that when I'm done with you. Now, wipe that silly smile off your face and get to work." Harry nodded and unsheathed his wand with a flick of his hand. Voldemort shook his head. "Not yet, my son. First, I want you to experience the curses. Then, we'll move on to the incantations and how to cast it." Harry cocked his head slightly, asking with a raised eyebrow cheekily, "Not the Killing Curse I hope?"

Voldemort cast a Stinging Hex at Harry for his snark, a hex which Harry dodged, before retorting. "Pay attention." Harry nodded slightly guiltily, then listened carefully as his father lectured about the properties of the Imperius Curse. "Now, I want you to experience it, Harry. Imperio."

It produced the most wonderful feeling ever. Harry felt a floating sensation as every thought and worry in his head was wiped gently away, leaving nothing but a vague, untraceable happiness. He stood there feeling immensely relaxed, only dimly aware of his father

watching him. Throw your wand on the floor. Throw it away... Harry felt himself dimly register the wand's presence in his hand, then lifted his arm to throw it. Why though, he asked himself absently. A rather stupid thing to do really – the wand was after all, the key to his magic. Throw it away. Throw it away now! The result was that Harry tried simultaneously to throw his wand away and to hold on to it, in the end, he swung his hand forward in a throwing motion but the wand remained tightly gripped in his hand.

When Voldemort released Harry from the spell, his father was sporting a smile. "Very good, my son. You have a strong will – no one has ever tried to resist my curse before, much less succeed, albeit partially." Harry smiled at his father, basking in the praise. When Voldemort insisted on putting Harry through the curse repeatedly until Harry could throw it off, Harry did not protest – he hated the feeling of being controlled.

Over the next week, Harry learnt the finer points of how to cast the Imperius Curse; the incantation, the wand movement, how to channel his power to bend the victim's will to his own, all of it. First he practiced on spiders, then on dogs. Finally, Voldemort deemed him sufficiently ready for his first human guinea pig – a Muggle that Bellatrix had brought back to play with.

Harry succeeded in controlling the Muggle on his very first try – a fact which pleased Voldemort to no end. "Though," he warned his son, "It will be much harder if the person you're trying to cast it on is a wizard who is strong-willed and has experience with the curse, Occulmency or both." Harry nodded, taking his father's warning to heart.

After that, Voldemort taught Harry the Cruciatus Curse. "Bella's favourite," he smirked. "Perhaps I should have her teach you this curse instead?" Harry glared at his father. "Merlin, no! Aunt Bella is addicted to the curse, she'd probably find as many opportunities to cast it on me as she can!" Voldemort twirled his wand sadistically. "And what makes you think I won't?"

Harry frowned and muttered sullenly, "At least you've heard me scream often enough..." Voldemort smiled in amusement. Then, after a quick warning, he cast the curse on Harry. That first time, Harry did scream, and loudly too, even as he felt twitching to the floor. When Voldemort released the curse after about ten seconds,

he asked Harry, "So, what do you think?" Harry winced as he gingerly sat up. "It was...worse than when Aunt Bella cast it on me." He ducked his head, not liking the fact that he was admitting a weakness. Voldemort nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose we'll save it for punishments then. I had wanted to slowly desensitize you to the curse by subjecting you to it daily, but that might cause insanity..." Harry shuddered at the thought of his father using the curse on him again for any reason at all.

He took a deep breath, then reminded himself that his father was usually a fairly just, if slightly harsh, disciplinarian with him. If the Dark Lord did use the curse on him, it would be because Harry had screwed up big time. In which case he would deserve it.

It took Harry two more weeks to get a handle on the Cruciatus curse and the Killing Curse. When Voldemort was finally satisfied that he could perform both, he called Harry to his study one evening.

"Harry, the time has come for you to make your decision. You know my goals and objectives – you know how I plan to achieve them. The question is: are you willing to join me? Or will you remain neutral?" Harry opened his mouth to reply but the Dark Lord forestalled him with one hand. "I do not want a hasty reply, Harry. I want you to think on it, for there will be no going back once you have decided. If you do join me, you will follow me without hesitation, unreservedly and willingly. Although you are my heir and not a Death Eater, you will still be subjected to the same expectations. Disobedience and failure will be severely punished; betrayal will get you killed." Harry nodded in understanding – he knew what his father was trying to say. As it was currently, Harry enjoyed liberties with his father that the Death Eaters did not. His disobedience was punished strictly but not harshly, his weaknesses and failure remedied by more lessons or chances to prove himself. As a fighter in the upcoming war, he would not be allowed such freedoms: for Voldemort would not be able to afford them.

"You will be going on a few missions from next week onwards, Harry. I will be revealing my presence once more; the Dark Mark will be sent into the skies again as raids begin. I want you to join these missions and to observe them before you make up your mind." Harry replied quietly, "Yes, sir." Voldemort offered Harry a sad smile. "Even if you should choose not to join me, you will still be my son."

Never doubt that." Harry returned the Dark Lord's smile. "I will never betray you Father," he vowed determinedly.

This was how Harry found himself clad in Death Eater robes, a plain silver half-mask on his face as a half-dozen Death Eaters prepared to make a raid on the home of one Sturgis Podmore, a known member of the Order of the Phoenix, one of those whose homes were not protected by the Fidelius Charm.

Out of the six Death-Eaters present, Harry only recognized two; the one currently bringing down the wards, Uncle Rody and the one giving last minute orders to the other Death Eaters, Aunt Bella. "In and out, but play to your hearts' content. Kill all the occupants of the house; there should be one man, one woman and two children.", Bellatrix ordered softly in a sing-song voice. "Harrison, stay close to me," Bellatrix whispered as she passed by Harry. For a moment, Harry bristled – he was not a child, he did not need to be coddled! – then he realized that Aunt Bella probably still did consider him a child, and her child at that.

Contenting himself with a small nod, Harry watched with interest as Uncle Rody disabled the Wards quickly and efficiently, noting how the colours, swirls and lines all disappeared as Rodolphus Lestrange untangled the knot tying the wards together. Since his thirteenth birthday, Harry had been able to see magic – an ability which would be useful when it came to bringing down wards, his father had commented. Harry had just about decided that he would take that as his elective in third year when all the Death Eaters started moving.

So far though, what interested Harry most about his new ability was that he was able to switch it on and off at will, and that he was also able to see the magical aura around wizards. His father's aura was so black, magnificent and blood-streaked that Harry always felt a sense of awe whenever he looked at his father with his special sight, Aunt Bella's was slightly lighter and much smaller, tinged with purple, Uncle Rody's was a rather more neutral brown and even smaller, while Uncle Lucius was a rich-chocolate brown shot with grey, about the same size as Aunt Bella's. Harry supposed the deepness of the colour depended on how much one delved into the Dark Arts, while the size represented power. In that case, he wouldn't be telling anyone about their auras – he did not wish to be responsible for any fights. Death Eaters could be rather childish sometimes.

With a mental shake of his head, Harry stopped his wool-gathering and stalked towards the quaint, dainty cottage silently, following behind his aunt. He noted that a few of the other Death Eaters looked at him curiously, but he merely ignored them. At the door, while Rodolphus led two Death Eaters to the back door just in case anyone tried to escape, Harry watched as his aunt cast an anti-apparition and anti-portkeying charm on the house. Marveling at the golden glow that emitted from the house after the charm was cast, Harry's attention only returned to Bellatrix when she blasted the door open.

"Mary, run! Go, take the children and run!" A wizard with a square jaw and thick straw-coloured hair shouted at his wife, a short and dumpy looking woman, who immediately grabbed one of the children's hands and ran in the direction of presumably the backdoor. "Now, now, we can't have that, can we? Oh Missus Podmore..." Bellatrix sang and cackled, sending red jets of light towards the running woman – stunning spells, even as the two other Death Eaters started to battle Sturgis Podmore. Harry stayed near his aunt as she neared the stunned woman, who lay on the ground even as a seven-year-old child cried in her arms. The other, a fourteen year-old boy, had dodged the stunner and was currently returning Bellatrix's attacks.

Harry watched fascinated as Bellatrix toyed with the boy. Aunt Bella really is an excellent duelist, Harry thought. Now, if only she didn't like to play with her food... Bellatrix Lestrange could have stunned or killed the boy within the first thirty seconds – however, she chose to drag it out, casting non-lethal but extremely painful spells on the boy that resulted in a lot of screaming.

Harry observed disinterestedly for a few moments, not at all moved by the boy's cries. In his opinion, he had lost his right to live when he had attacked his Aunt Bella. He allowed his attention to move to the other younger child, feeling a flash of pity for the little girl. It was not the girl's fault, after all, that her parents were ardent supporters of Dumbledore and members of the Order of the Phoenix. Nevertheless, such was war. The girl had to die – the Dark side could not afford to show any form of weakness to the Light. In addition, the girl would probably grow up to hate the Dark – why not nip a possible avenger in the bud while the girl was still young and of no threat? Then, there was the fact that the girl, even if she were to

survive, would not have a pleasant life at all. Harry thought back darkly to his time at the Dursleys and concluded that yes, the girl would be better off dead.

He turned his attention to Podmore next, who was slowly being forced backwards by the Death Eaters. He was an adept duelist, Harry had to give the man that. However, when Rodolphus and the other men had secured the rest of the house against all possible escape and joined in the fray, he was overwhelmed and forced to his knees. Thereafter, Harry watched neutrally as the Death Eaters laughed and toyed with the man, even as Podmore refused to say scream. Then, one suggested cruelly, "Why don't we let the man watch his wife and children die with his own eyes?"

Bellatrix giggled as she gave permission. First, she finished off the teenager in a bright flash of green light. Then, she caressed her wand lovingly as she participated in the torture of the wife and the young girl. Harry thought that Bellatrix appeared to be enjoying this even more than the most recent birthday present that Harry had given to her, a beautiful, jewel-studded hairbrush that she had gushed over. Next time, maybe I'll just get Aunt Bella someone to torture?

Ignoring the uncomfortable twinge from whatever was leftover from his conscience at the torture of the young child, Harry watched in amusement as Podmore broke down crying. The man, who had been so brave and fierce even in the face of his own torture and death, broke into tiny pieces at the death of his spouse and children.

In the end, one of the other Death Eaters finished the little girl as Bellatrix finished the wife. Then, Rodolphus killed off the man with the Killing Curse, and the Podmore family was no more.

After they were outside, Bellatrix turned to Harry with a smile. "Harrison, I know you're only here to observe, but do you want to do the honours? Burn the building and cast the Dark Mark into the sky." The other Death Eaters appeared to be stunned; it seemed that this was a jealously guarded privilege.

Harry inclined his head slightly. "Thank you, Aunt Bella." Harry flicked his wand out and shouted "Incendio!" Bright, huge, roaring green flames sprung up around the house eerily as Harry displayed a powerful and tightly controlled burning curse that burned only the

house and did not touch the garden, or the bodies within the house. The Death Eaters who did not know him all looked shocked – they could tell from his unbroken voice and height that he was merely a child; how then, did a child like him perform such a powerful spell?

"Morsmordre!" With a smirk, Harry sent the Dark Mark into the sky, before he side-along apparated with Bellatrix back to the Manor.

After two more missions of observation, once with Barty leading, observing how he decimated a small pack of werewolves who had refused to join the Dark Lord, and once with Lucius leading, watching him negotiate an alliance with a clan of centaurs, Harry had a pretty good first-hand experience of what his father's missions consisted of. The last day of August, he finally decided to tell his father of his decision.

In his father's study, he watched as the Dark Lord perused the Daily Prophet in an armchair beside his desk. "Has the Ministry acknowledged your return yet, Father?" Harry asked curiously. "No." Voldemort sounded amused. "They claim that the two raids I conducted in the past month is orchestrated by dear Bella and Rodolphus – Death-Eaters whom the Ministry failed to capture the first time round, who have suddenly decided to come out of hiding."

Harry snorted at that. "The Ministry is indeed run by a bunch of incompetents. I wonder how long they'll take to realize the truth." Voldemort steepled his long spindly fingers together. "Not in the short term. Now Harry, what do you have on your mind?"

Despite Harry's progress with Occlumency, his father could still read him like a book. Harry shrugged slightly, then decided to plunge ahead. "Father, during this past month, you have given me the opportunity to witness firsthand some of your plans put into motion – raids, attacks and negotiations – without the need to participate in them. I want to thank you for what you've done for me; I know you don't give other recruits the same treatment at all." He ended with a wry tilt of his eyebrow.

Voldemort smirked, then gestured for Harry to continue. "I find that I whole-heartedly agree with your methods and your plans – they are nothing short of genius. I know that you thought I might be frightened off by the cruelty and bloodshed – I assure you that I am not. I respect your goals; I believe in them. I admire your methods; I

am willing to participate in them. And most of all, I revere you, as both my father and the Dark Lord; I am willing to submit to you and to follow your lead, as my lord and leader. I, Harrison Maximus Riddle, do so swear and avow." At the last, Harry kneeled before his father in accordance with pure-blood etiquette, bowing his head in deference.

"Look at me Harry." Harry obediently raised his eyes to meet his father's, no his Lord's, crimson eyes. "I, Tom Marvolo Riddle, also known as the Dark Lord Voldemort, accept your vow." A rush of exaltation flooded Harry. He had done it – he had finally made his decision. Henceforth, he was truly a Dark wizard. Voldemort gestured for Harry to rise. "I will introduce you to the rest of my servants another time, Harry. As of now, keep this to yourself." Harry nodded. "Yes, my lord."

Voldemort's lips twitched into a small, rare smile. "You are still my son, Harry. Treat me as such when we are not about official business." Harry sighed in relief. "I was sort of worried that you'd want me to bow and scrape all the time, Father." Voldemort sent a Stinging Hex Harry's way, which Harry did not manage to dodge, due to his close proximity to his father. "Watch your tongue, brat."

Harry winced slightly at the rising red welt on his arm. "Yes, Father. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to pack up." He flashed an impudent grin at his father before leaving the study.

I hope I don't disappoint anyone who's looking for a Harry who turns away from Voldemort...I know there's quite a few out there where Harry has a sudden epiphany/change-of-heart. But in this story, Harry stays dark. While he didn't get much hands-on this time round, there's always next time!

Chapter Seventeen: Durmstrang Year 3 Part I

The first day of a new school year. Harry pinned his prefect badge – a small silver badge that spelled out 'Prefect' in elaborate, cursive writing – onto his robes smartly before boarding the Durmstrang ship with his companions. This year, those of his followers who resided in Britain had met him at the port before boarding the ship with him.

Entering an empty cabin, Harry immediately seated himself in the centre of the wooden bench, watching the others with hooded eyes as Daphne seated herself next to him and immediately begun regaling Harry with the tales of her holiday. Aleron positioned himself on the other side of Harry while Silas seated himself by Aleron's feet, with his head resting on the bench between Aleron and Harry.

Emlen and Francis sprawled across the opposite bench and the twins positioned themselves on each side of the door, like sentries guarding the doorway. When the ship stopped at different ports on the way to Durmstrang, more people joined Harry's cabin. Korbin stepped in, took one look at the tableau before him, smiled slyly and seated himself on the floor in front of Emlen, facing Harry, while Alexei frowned slightly until Francis shifted to make room for him.

Harry smiled at the power play amongst those in the room, even as Daphne chattered on obliviously. Or perhaps not so obliviously. One never could tell with her. Clearing his throat, he petted Daphne's hand slightly, indicating that he would like to speak. Daphne tilted her head to one side curiously – Harry rarely engaged in idle chatter in large groups.

After casting a strong privacy spell on the cabin, Harry begun, "Emlen, Alexei, Francis and Korbin. Do you remember what I mentioned before the end of the school year?" He watched his room-mates' reactions carefully.

Emlen exchanged glances with both Alexei and Francis, before speaking up wryly, "It's rather difficult to forget isn't it? What with the huge firecracker you dropped on us..." Harry raised an eyebrow, gesturing for Emlen to elaborate. Emlen raised a hand and begun to tick off points, "First. Back in our first year, you arrived at school with two followers – Aleron and Silas. Everyone can see that, for some reason, they defer to you. Daphne is the only female constantly

seen by your side. All three come from Dark, pureblood families, with suspected ties to Death Eaters. Second. You are rather close to the Malfoys. Draco allows you to use his manor to host parties and gatherings. Yet, one has to wonder why none of these parties are held at your place – you're clearly rich enough."

Harry smirked as Emlen eyed the silver rings, all inset with beautifully carved precious stones, on Harry's fingers. "Third. You are gathering followers at Durmstrang, selecting only the most talented or loyal into the Group. The full name of the Group, the Dark Court of the Night, hints at your intentions. Fourth. Daphne referred to you as a prince. Even if it was in jest, the title hints at a lot. Fifth. You are a Parseltongue – the only other known wizard to speak the language was the Dark Lord. Sixth. The Dark Lord's forces has been rather active over summer. Even if the Ministry insists that the ringleaders are Death Eaters, those of us with brains and some connections know better." Harry smiled in amusement – clearly, Aleron's assessment of him was correct. Emlen indeed hid his shrewd mind behind a jovial exterior.

"Very good, Emlen." Harry praised softly as his emerald-coloured eyes gleamed in the sunlight flooding the cabin. "And what, pray tell, is your conclusion then?" He allowed his voice to fall into formal cadences. Emlen noticed the switch and smiled. Looking into the eyes of the person he considered his friend and acknowledged as his leader, he replied with a challenging glint in his eyes. "You are closely related to the Dark Lord."

Harry inclined his head slightly. "I am his son and heir." All four third-year males sucked in their breaths – it was one thing to have their suspicions and quite another altogether to have said suspicions confirmed. With a sharp, predatory smirk, Harry then proceeded to give a short summary of the objectives of the Dark.

"All of you were my room-mates for two years – you know me well. You all know of my abilities, you all know my leadership style. All of you have spoken often of your own ideals – they coincide perfectly with that of the Dark. I plan to become my Father's right hand in the upcoming war. Will you follow me?" Harry held the gaze of each and every one of his roommate's solemnly.

Silence filled the cabin after Harry's question. Then, after a few moments, Emlen stood up and walked towards Harry. Stopping at

an appropriate distance, he went down on one knee before his friend. "Harrison, these two years, I have watched as you manipulated and fought your way up. I have seen you grow into a great leader with an even greater potential. I have witnessed your abilities first hand. And I have observed your sense of responsibility towards those you consider yours. I am proud to call you my friend, and I am willing to follow you. " He took a deep breath, then look up at Harry determinedly, "I, Emlen Julius Zedar, hereby swear to take Harrison Maximus Riddle as my prince and leader in the service of the Dark Lord."

His cousin, Francis followed suit with a quirk of his lips. "I concur, Harrison, and not just because he's my cousin. I, Francis Horatio Sylvanus hereby swear to take Harrison Maximus Riddle as my prince and leader in the service of the Dark Lord."

Alexei then stepped forward gravely. "My prince, you gave me a chance to shine in my own right, out of my brother's shadows. You were the first person who saw me for my own capabilities. For that, I will always be grateful – I will serve you willingly. " Kneeling before Harry, he swore his service to Harry and the Dark Lord.

Korbin rose lazily from the floor with a smirk on his face. "Harrison, back when I first met you, I knew you were special. I admit, I didn't expect you to be this special. Life around you will be very interesting – I just know it." He knelt with a dramatic flourish in front of Harry. However, he seemed to know that Harry would not tolerate him making a mockery of the vow, for when he said the words, he was uncharacteristically sincere and serious.

"Welcome to the ranks then, my friends." Harry proceeded to give his new followers the wristbands that he had first given to Aleron, Silas and Daphne in his first year, explaining its uses. When that was done, Harry finally allowed himself a small smile of contentment.

The year begun with Harry being rather overwhelmed with his new duties as Prefect – he had to attend meetings, help the professors, lead the first-years around, explain the rules to them and generally helping them to settle in. Harry recalled the rather brusque manner in which Deverill had done so in his first year, and decided that he would not follow in his footsteps; he was charming, polite and helpful. As a result, many of the first-years liked him, and he easily gained the membership of the most talented of the batch.

The Night Serpents by now, had a membership of thirty-four students; a number that rivaled the Jade Talons and was second only to the Blood Ravens. Harry had finally decided to expel Ivan and Ekaterina from the Group, as well as a few others, to make way for more talents while keeping the group as slim as possible. It was not easy; busy with his Prefect duties, Harry delegated most of the day to day administration of the group to Aleron, Silas, Emlen and Daphne.

The latter had actually quite surprised him. While Harry had always known that Daphne was as shrewd as Emlen and as capable as Aleron, she had never quite shown any inclination to aid in the management of the Group, preferring to enjoy herself with her female friends. This year however, she had volunteered to take charge of the first and second-year members. Pleasantly surprised, Harry had accepted – he supposed she had matured over the summer.

Which left him to deal with the Head Boy, Head Girl and the other Prefects in the Prefect meetings which were essentially a jostling of power by the various Prefects for the sake of themselves and their Groups. It never ceased to amuse Harry at how much the various Prefects puffed, preened and argued for the sake of argument, over the most trifling of duties and privileges. Nevertheless, such weaknesses on the part of the others meant that Harry could advance his own agenda much more easily; he formed alliances with the smaller Groups' Prefects: seventh-year Yolanda Cornstock, Lady of the Lavender Girls, fifth-year Madeline Schneider, also of Lavender Girls, sixth-year Lionel Moreau, Captain of the Maroon Wings, sixth-year Alain Laroche, leader of the Ivory Horns and so on.

With Harry's rejection of the Jade Talons' offer of alliance from the previous year, their Group had been treating the Night Serpents with animosity – impromptu duels soon sprang up between both Groups members in the corridors and many of the lower years soon ended up in the Healing Bay. It was like last year all over again, save this time, the opponents consisted of the upper-years, who were meaner and more powerful.

In the end, Harry negotiated for the Maroon Wings, Ivory Horns and Lavender Girls to order their lower-year Group members to look out for his own Group members in the same year, in exchange for his

support behind some of their maneuverings during meetings. Meanwhile, he began to formulate a plan to weaken the Jade Talons.

In the meantime, Harry was also rather busy with his lessons. As a third-year student, he was required to submit his choice of two electives on the first day of school; out of the six available electives (Care of Magical Creatures, Curse-breaking, Necromancy, Wards, Wizarding Etiquette and Culture, and Wizarding Politics), Harry chose Necromancy and Wards. He knew his father had dabbled in Necromancy in his youth, to the extent of being able to raise an army of Inferi – Harry wanted to achieve the same. Such an army, he mused, would be rather useful in the upcoming war.

"Necromancy is an art." Professor Vladislav cel Rau, a grim and mysterious man dressed in robes with a hooded cowl, stated softly. Professor cel Rau was a mystery indeed – he never appeared for meals at the great hall and generally kept to himself. Indeed, the only interaction he had with other people were during classes and staff meetings. Rumours abound about his origin – some said he was a vampire, some thought he was a descendent of European wizarding royalty, still others thought he was a half-Dementor.

Harry and Alexei, together with three other third-years, listened intrigued as cel Rau stated that in order to become a full and complete Necromancer, one had to let go of all ties and be devoid of all human emotions. Harry supposed that was why his father had never truly succeeded at Necromancy, despite his genius at the other subjects – the man harboured too much hatred in him to be able to achieve that state. Not that Harry wanted to either; he thought that the sacrifice was too great. However, upon close observation of Alexei, he found that his friend was listening with rapt attention, a thoughtful look on his face.

Harry realized where the appeal was for Alexei. Constantly ignored by his parents in favour of his older brother, who was on his way to become a star seeker, not only in school but also in professional Quidditch, always overshadowed and overlooked, it might be a relief for him to let go of all human ties and emotions. And he even showed a natural aptitude for the art – it was the one class in which Alexei managed to surpass Harry. After one lesson, Harry cornered Alexei. "Alexei, my friend, I will not dissuade you if you are truly intent on this road. However, I want you to think on it carefully. Think of all that you will be giving up in exchange." Harry watched as

Alexei allowed his eyes to rove over the sleeping forms of their other roommates. Then, he took a deep breath and nodded, "My prince, I will think on your words."

Harry's other elective was shared with Emlen, Korbin and five others. Harry had been slightly surprised at Korbin's choice of Curse-breaking and Wards; he would have thought Korbin would go for the easy subjects of Care of Magical Creatures and Wizarding Etiquette and Culture. Korbin had laughingly revealed that he would like to be employed as a Curse-Breaker at Gringotts one day, as it promised a life of glamour and adventure.

The Professor, one Lokia Hashmi, said of the subject, "Wards have many protective uses – to protect an item, a house, or even people. In this course, we will not only learn to put up wards, but also to unravel them with both brute force and finesse." She cast her steely gaze over the students. "Have you ever wondered why Ancient Runes and Arithmancy is a core subject in this school, unlike in most others? When you learn the art of warding and unraveling, you will realize that both runes and arithmancy play an integral role. Now, I have a question for everyone: Who here is able to see magic?"

It was a rhetorical question, one that Professor Hashmi asked of her new third-years every year, one that she did not expect a positive reply to. The last person able to do so was, according to rumours, the Dark Lord. Before him, none had laid claim to this ability for a century – it was an extremely rare ability on par with that of Parseltongue. "Right. Extremely few, perhaps one in several thousand or even less, are born with this ability. For those of us not Gifted in this manner, when we form or break the wards, we have to visualize the magic that goes into the wards in your own mind. Concentration, students, concentration is the key."

Harry kept silent as Professor Hashmi plunged into the lesson with her brisk and efficient manner. He preferred to keep his abilities under wraps, especially since some might see the link to his father – it was, after all, a hereditary ability that Harry only gained because of the magical blood adoption ritual.

As his warding lessons progressed however, Harry realized just how easy he had it when he immediately understood the theory behind warding and unraveling, when his fellow classmates had trouble comprehending them, simply because he could see the structure of

the wards (around Durmstrang grounds, around some of the teachers' rooms, around some of the Groups' common rooms etc) as multi-coloured shimmers of thread-like light. He could immediately find the fault lines in the wards, or the key knots, which was the first step towards unraveling the tangle of magic behind the wards.

Harry was extremely fascinated, much like he had been in his early Ancient Runes education. During Christmas holidays, he went around the Manor examining the wards, studying their characteristics and patterns. Whenever he encountered something he did not understand, he would ask his father about it. Voldemort was happy that his heir had taken an interest in this subject – he told Harry that it was a useful skill to have on raids. Of his Death Eaters, only Barty, the Lestrangle brothers, Nott and Greengrass were any good at it.

During the annual students' Christmas party, Harry was strolling around the Malfoys' garden, observing the wards when he stumbled upon an interesting sight – behind a rosebush, Aleron was stretched out above Silas, kissing the other teen passionately as Silas, pressed into the ground, moaned beneath him. Harry cleared his throat slightly, watching with amusement as Aleron rolled off Silas speedily, springing to his feet. His face flushed red as he realized just who had caught him. "Young Master! We...We were..." Still on the floor, Silas' hair was mussed, his face no less red as he resolutely refused to look at Harry.

"I think it's quite clear what you were doing, Aleron. If you must, do it behind closed doors. Or at least cast a privacy charm." Harry rebuked sharply as he watched his followers squirm. Really! For two pureblood scions to abandon all caution to the winds like that...Harry could only marvel at the strength of teenage hormones. Aleron bowed guiltily. "I...wasn't thinking. I can only offer my deepest apologies, my prince. It won't happen again." Harry nodded once then left them to it, secretly amused. One wouldn't have thought that Aleron could be so dominating, judging from how the teen behaved in Harry's presence. But then, Aleron acted differently around others, always one to take charge – it was why Harry had chosen the older male as his second-in-command at Durmstrang.

Showing his organizational skills, Aleron had helped Harry to keep the Night Serpents united in defense, and had even organized a few attacks of his own.

The Jade Talons' offensive actions had been increasing in magnitude for some time. Even some of the upper-years and high ranking members of the Night Serpents were targeted with impunity. Septimus and Octavius had ended up unconscious in the Healing Bay after they had been ambushed by four of their year-mates.

Two weeks after Christmas, matters came to a head. Harry was strolling down the third floor corridor heading for Transfiguration class when he saw Emlen, Francis, Alexei and Daphne headed towards him from the opposite direction – he supposed they were heading back to the common room after lunch. Then, suddenly, two seventh-years jumped out from behind the stone statue at the other end of the corridor. Without so much as a warning, they sent curses at the trio – Harry snarled as one hit Daphne and two hit Alexei. The two collapsed with loud screams – Daphne's back had a fiery slash across it while Alexei was covered in boils, and his arm had twisted at an awkward angle. How dare they! How dare they hurt my friends! Daphne!

"Stupefy! Stupefy!" Harry aimed at the two offenders who had tried to run off upon the success of the sneak-attack. Such was Harry's power that the two spells did not fizzle out in mid-air, but caught the two square in the back, despite them being more than twenty metres from Harry. The two seventh-years fell to the ground, Stunned, as Harry stalked over, fury boiling in his veins. "Get Daphne and Alexei to the Healing Bay, now!" He ordered Emlen and Francis, who were crouching over the two. Francis immediately moved to comply while Emlen hovered, his expression one of worry – the look in Harry's eyes frightened him.

Levitating the two in midair, he saw that they were high-ranking members of the Jade Talon – one of them was the third-in-command. Harry saw red and snarled, "I will not tolerate cowardly sneak attacks on my friends – they are mine to protect!" He whipped his wand in the air in a slashing motion twice; immediately, deep cuts appeared on the torso of both captives.

"Flagrate permanus!" Harry then added furiously, waving his wand in an intricate pattern – a rune for 'forever'. Flaming red ropes

appeared on the exact location of the slashes on the two seventh-years' prompting loud screams and shrieking from the twain. Harry's lips curled upwards as he started to wave his wand again.

"My prince, that's enough stop, please, stop!" Suddenly, Emlen was by his side, his eyes flashing with anxiety and a small amount of fear. Harry turned and eyed his friend coldly. He did not know whether he would have stopped or not, however, just at that moment, a shouted "Finite Incantatem!" filled the air and the two levitated students fell to the floor with another round of screams.

Harry watched dispassionately as Frederick Flint appeared from behind him with a couple of books tucked under one arm. "What have you done?" The Professor hissed furiously at Harry, his eyes glinting dangerously, even as he laid the books on the floor and examined the injured students – the wounds were still oozing blood, and the fiery marks remained, as bright as ever.

After returning Professor Flint's glare coldly, Harry eyed the marks he had left on the students with cold satisfaction – the fiery slashes would remain until their dying day, even after the wounds had healed. Which would take at least a few days.

Apparently, Professor Flint knew that too, for he said in a steely tone, his eyes promising dire retribution, "Riddle, Zedar, you're coming with me to see the Highmaster." The books lay on the floor forgotten.

Despite the luxuriant dark oaken furnishings, fluffy thick Persian carpets, opulent chandeliers and gilt-framed portraits, the Highmaster's office looked cold and forbidding, at least to one Emlen Julius Zedar. He was currently standing in front of the Highmaster's desk, awaiting said person's pleasure – he shifted nervously from foot to foot, despite the fact that it was technically not him who was in trouble.

Emlen found it difficult to hide behind his usual jovial mask – he had, after all, never been in trouble before. Not that he currently was, he amended quickly. No, if anyone was in trouble, it would be his...friend? Leader? Master? Emlen did not know how to refer to the person beside him, who was so many things to him. He stole a glance at the black-haired youth, amazed by the fact that Harrison was just standing calmly, no trace of nervousness or panic in his demeanor. Indeed, if Emlen was any judge, he could have sworn

that the glint in Harrison's eyes was one of anger; anger which was directed, Emlen guessed, at the two seventh-years. And perhaps at Professor Flint too, for interrupting his revenge? Emlen shuddered mentally.

Before he could ruminate further, the door swung open and the Highmaster entered with Professor Flint, Professor Rosier and Professor Eastwood. The Highmaster moved to sit behind his desk, then, he gestured permission for Professor Flint to proceed. "As I was on my way to class, I heard screams. Loud screams. Immediately, I rushed to the scene of crime," Here, Professor Flint glared malevolently at Harrison, who did not give any visible reaction. "...where I saw Riddle here in the act of...of torturing the two bound students, with no signs of stopping. Both had long, diagonal cuts down their torsos, which were flaming red – a Flagrate charm over the wound, which did not stop even when I cast finite. Were it not for my arrival, I think it would be safe to say that the two students would have been grievously wounded." A sharp intake of breath could be heard from Professor Eastwood.

The Highmaster turned his cold gaze onto Emlen and Harrison. "What do you have to say for yourself, Mister Riddle?" Emlen saw that Harrison's eyes were still a flaming emerald. He knew, even before Harrison spoke, that the next words out of his mouth would be inflammatory. "For myself, Highmaster? Nothing. They deserved what they got and more, for their crimes against me and mine. Never doubt this – were it not for Professor Flint's presence, their injuries would have been much more severe." This pronouncement sent shivers down everyone's spine – none doubted that Harrison meant it.

Emlen just stared. He knew that Harrison was powerful. He knew that Harrison could be vindictive and sadistic. He even knew that Harrison was protective, from the way he looked after the younger years. What he did not expect though, was for these characteristics to be exacerbated and combined into something...something this earthshakingly frightening. Harrison was currently emitting a majestic and powerful aura, much, much stronger and darker than a teen his age should have. Even if Emlen could not see the magic, he could feel it.

"What did they do?" Professor Eastwood whispered, probably in surprise that her favourite student could be capable of such a...Dark

deed. When it appeared that Harrison had no intention of answering, Emlen cleared his throat. Glancing at his leader for permission, he was relieved when Harrison nodded minutely. Emlen spoke up, "As Francis Sylvanus, Daphne Greengrass, Alexei Krum and I were strolling down the Transfiguration corridor, Simonyi and Cojocarú ambushed us. One minute I was walking towards the common room, planning to greet my Group leader, who was walking towards our direction, the next, Daphne and Alexei had collapsed, screaming. Alexei's arm was broken and he was covered with angry red boils. Daphne was bleeding from a slash wound..."

Harry tried to rein in his anger as Emlen described his friends' injuries again. His third-in-command must have noticed, for he hurriedly continued the story. "Francis brought them to the Healing Bay...I stayed behind."

"And why did you stay behind?" Edgar Rosier asked frostily, no doubt wondering if Emlen was complicit as well. Emlen swallowed, glancing at Harry again. This time, Harry gave no indication – let Emlen say what he would, Harry did not much care at the moment. Softly, Emlen replied, "I stayed behind to support my Group Leader if he should need me." Edgar Rosier frowned, "And what did your Group Leader do next?"

This time, Harry decided to relieve the burden on Emlen; he gave a curt nod, indicating that Emlen could relate the truth. "He threw two stunners at Simonyi and Cojocarú. I had been tending to Daphne and Alexi, when I turned around, he had them bound and in midair. Then..." Emlen swallowed again. "He cut them up."

"And why did you not stop him?" Flint asked menacingly. Emlen did not reply immediately; he took a deep breath, then met the teacher's gaze steadily. "I approved of my leader's actions – they deserved it." Emlen's gaze then shifted to Harry. Harry met his friend's gaze, taken aback by the swirl of emotions in them. Thank you, my friend.

Starting to calm down, Harry realized that he did want to get Emlen into trouble when it was entirely his fault. He carefully crafted his face into a sneer. "And yet you tried to stop me when I wanted to do more." Emlen ducked his head. His voice was meek as he answered, "I apologise."

Flint snarled, "The boy has nothing to apologize for. It is you, Riddle, who owes everyone an apology!" Turning to the Highmaster, he spoke, "Highmaster, I recommend that Riddle be disciplined then expelled. His actions are unacceptable."

Quick to come to the defense of her favourite student, Victoria Eastwood frowned, "Really now, Frederick, is that necessary? The students curse each other all the time. Why, judging from what Mr. Zedar said, Simonyi and Cojocarú struck the first blow. Should they be expelled too then? Highmaster, I recommend detentions...perhaps a week's worth?"

"Hexing and dueling another student is one thing, using such dark curses to cause permanent damage is yet another!" Flint retorted. Harry watched dispassionately as the professors argued about his fate. He turned to study the Highmaster; though Karkaroff hid it carefully, he was clearly nervous about having to discipline his lord's son for such a huge infraction. Expulsion, or even suspension, was out of the question – the Dark Lord would have Karkaroff's head for that, and he knew it.

"Perhaps a compromise?" Rosier interjected calmly. While Rosier had a soft spot for Harry, Harry knew that the man tried to be as fair as he could. "What Mr. Riddle did was undeniably wrong. Perhaps as a strong deterrent against future infractions, since Mr. Riddle is leader of his Group – a thousand points should be taken from his Group. In addition, of course, to two weeks' worth of detention and corporal punishment, to be determined by Professor Flint."

Harry fought the urge to strangle the man. The loss of a thousand points would set back his plans, perhaps irreparably – he had to stop it at all costs. He met Karkaroff's eyes and shook his head once imperceptibly, then nodded twice. That should be enough for the man to get the hint...

When it came to saving his skin, Karkaroff was a smart man. He immediately stated, "Why, Edgar, I do believe that two weeks' worth of detentions in addition to corporal punishment is enough. Mr. Zedar, his Group member, did after all try to stop him, in addition, Miss Greengrass and Mr. Krum also suffered injuries. It would be unfair to further penalize the Group. Although I must say, the taking of points should be carried out – from the Jade Talons. Mr. Simonyi and Mr. Cojocarú attacked other students without any warnings or

declarations, this is against the school rules. Therefore, three hundred points each, a total of six hundred, shall be taken from the Jade Order of Talents. Considering their injuries, no other punishment will be meted out to the two. Mister Riddle will serve half of his detentions, to be held every weekday night for two weeks, with Professor Flint, and the other half with Professor Eastwood. Professor Flint is authorized to use up to the second level of corporal punishment and no more."

Exulting inwardly, Harry smiled politely at the Highmaster and inclined his head. "Yes, sir." Indeed, Karkaroff knew how to worm himself into another's good graces (he knew that Group points mattered most to Harry, and even took points off from the Jade Talons). Harry had to fight to maintain a neutral expression at the shocked looks on the Professors' faces – he was sure it was one of the lightest punishments ever handed out for such an infraction.

Oh I thought I should mention this: any spell incantation which looks strange to your sharp eyes was probably modified or invented by me, using a english-latin online translator. I hope the new powers/spells etc. does not you too much, but I simply couldn't resist the temptation.

Ok, it's back to revision for me now, cheers.

Chapter Eighteen – Durmstrang Year Three Part II

After that confrontation in the Highmaster's office, Harry remained in the Healing Bay with his two friends until they woke up, which was not until the day after the attack. He had spent the night penning a letter about the incident to his father. Once more, he was glad that his father had a hands-off approach when it came to his school life. While they did discuss Harry's plans and activities occasionally, Voldemort generally acknowledged his son's independence. Other than a requirement for Harry to keep his grades up and his identity secret, Voldemort did not censure much Harry on his various misdemeanors (other than a few snide, pointed comments), so Harry wasn't too worried about his father's reaction. Karkaroff, he knew, would try to downplay Harry's mistakes as much as possible, for his father hated negative news (he tended to curse the messenger).

At the sight of Daphne's eyes fluttering open, Harry shut the heavy black leather-covered book he had been perusing with a dark frown. "How are you feeling, Daphne?" Harry asked softly as he petted his friend's hand lightly. Daphne smiled up at him hazily, "Been better...did you take revenge for me, Harrison?" Seeing Daphne like this, fragile and seemingly helpless on the pristine sheets of the Healing Bay's bed invoked a fiercely protective instinct in Harry. For a moment, he was reminded of the giggling doll-like girl-child he had first met when he was nine, who had drawn him out of his initial shyness with her innocent chatter.

Smiling, Harry inclined his head in a courtly nod. "Of course, my dear Daphne, you need not worry about them any longer." Daphne giggled softly. "Here, I brought you a get-well-soon gift." Harry handed his friend a small pendant dangling from a silver necklace. The pendant was a blazing emerald carved in the shape of a serpent – he knew Daphne liked jewellery. It was a characteristic they both shared; sometimes, Harry wondered who had the larger collection. "Why, I'm flattered. Thank you, my prince." Daphne fluttered her eyelashes at him coquettishly before dissolving into giggles. Looking at his friend's smiles, Harry thought that his actions were worth it, even if it had resulted in two weeks worth of detention and painful marks on his back. Which had lasted all of an hour half, before being fully healed by Harry's body.

Another good thing which came out of the incident was that the Jade Talons had lost their second placing due to the loss of six hundred points. As a result, the Night Serpents were now ranked second, just below the Blood Ravens. It was a fact over which the leader was extremely irked, for one day, he stormed up to Harry during breakfast and issued a stony challenge to duel, staking six hundred points on the outcome of the duel.

It was one of those pivotal moments; on one hand, Harry was aware that he might be badly hurt as the opponent was an extremely skilled seventh-year, on the other, Harry knew that if he won this duel, the Jade Talons would be finished. Weighing one against the other, Harry made his decision in a split second. He calmly stood up and held out his hand. "I, Harrison Maximus Riddle, prince of the Dark Court of the Night, accept your challenge." Naming Aleron as his second and the place as the Dueling Arena, open to all, Harry felt a tight knot form in his stomach as the Jade Talon leader, Oriole Lector Fleetwood named the time as the Saturday morning three weeks before Easter holidays – it meant that almost the whole school would turn up. This was, after all, a duel between two Group Leaders from the Groups in second and third position.

Harry usually had confidence in his ability to win, but not this time. He knew that Fleetwood was a good duelist – he had watched two of his duels before, and knew that it would be unlikely for him to win without some sort of strategy. He spent the rest of the month studying and training – he was taking his OWLs in Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Charms, Dark Arts and Transfiguration this year and could not afford to slack off. The good thing was, training for the duel helped him to study for the practicals of the last three subjects at the same time, something which his training partners, Aleron, Silas and the Withers twins pointed out.

The few nights before the duel, Harry spent time painting runes on his dueling robes and on Nuit. By now, Nuit had grown into snake almost two meters long and was as thick as the trunk of a young sapling. 'Massster, it tickless' Nuit hissed, though he compliantly lay still under Harry's brush. 'Husssh, little one, it'll only take a while more.' Harry replied, petting Nuit softly on the head.

The day of the duel arrived amidst much furor. Before Harry left the Night Serpents' common room, he was offered many solemn words of luck and support. Most looked worried and concerned, as all knew

that Fleetwood would be a difficult opponent. Daphne, disregarding all propriety, even hugged him. "My best wishes, Harrison." She had whispered softly, even as her grey-blue eyes filled with emotion.

Harry had extracted himself from her embrace gracefully, before allowing meeting the gaze of his followers. "My friends, I will not fail you." Then, surrounded by his Group members, he made his way to the Dueling Arena.

Edgar Rosier had offered to be the referee this time. In such high profile matches, to prevent accusations of favoritism or cheating, professors usually took on such roles. Especially since the Head Boy this year was one Oriole Fleetwood...

"The duel will end upon surrender or inability to continue the battle. Weapons: wands only. Terms: No Unforgivables. Duelists, bow to each other. You may begin now!"

Instead of throwing spells around immediately, Fleetwood and Harry circled each other, looking for openings. Slowly, slowly, cautiously and warily. The atmosphere in the Dueling Arena was tense, the tension palpable. Then suddenly, Fleetwood appeared to stumble. Aware that it might be feint, but unwilling to let go of the opportunity anyway, Harry silently cast a stinging hex at the older male. It had been a feint: Fleetwood dodged it easily, even as he returned fire.

The next few minutes passed in a silent, intense verbal spell-casting. Bright jets of light flew back and forth between the two. Occasionally, one would raise a shield charm to block one of the spells, but other than that, it consisted of a lot of dodging and casting on the part of the two duelists.

On a bench near the duel ground, Aleron watched in admiration as his prince battled the older male. While he prided himself on being a good duelist, he knew that he would not have survived five minutes with Fleetwood without acquiring some form of injury. Yet his prince was battling the Head Boy effortlessly, holding his own.

However, the next moment, Fleetwood shot three streaks of red light at his prince, blocking all the possible routes of escape. With a snarl, his prince cast a levitating spell on himself and jumped clear of the spells – it took less power than to raise a shield charm. When he landed, the two opponents were back to circling each other.

The entire exchange had taken no more than ten minutes, yet Harry was slightly winded. While he got quite a lot of exercise playing Quidditch, his thirteen-year old body just did not have same stamina as Fleetwood's seventeen-year-old one. He had to end this, and soon, or he would be defeated by fatigue.

Taking a calculated risk, Harry rushed at Fleetwood, hoping to catch the older male by surprise. He cast three spells in quick succession, shooting them to the left, right and at Fleetwood himself, dark curses which sang to his blood even as he snapped them off. Unfortunately, Fleetwood was too experienced a duelist to fall for it. Before even defending or dodging, he shot two quick spells at Harry, then he raised a shield with a shouted "Protego!"

Caught by surprise, Harry was in such close proximity to Fleetwood that even though he threw himself to the side as quickly as he could, one of the spells hit him in the ribs, throwing him backwards onto the hard stone floor that was the Dueling ring. Harry stifled a scream as pain flooded through him, from both his extremely bruised ribs and the parts of his body that had hit the floor. It hurt everywhere.

But it could have been worse, were it not for the protection that the runes painted onto his dueling robes afforded him. As it was, it was no worse than what his father usually did to him during their training sessions, so after using his skill at Occlumency to block out the pain, Harry quickly leapt to his feet.

It was time for a last gambit, Harry thought grimly. Usually, he would not do something so risky and dangerous, but left with no other viable ways to win and with so much at stake (his reputation, his Group's position, his Group's reputation, and most important of all, his plans for recruitment), he was determined to give it his all. Was this due to his Gryffindor courage, inherited from his biological parents? Or Slytherin ambition, from his adoptive father?

Harry raised his wand, waved it in an intricate replica of the rune "combine", and spoke the extremely dark spell that he had modified in a harsh voice, "Fiendfyre Nuit lunctura!" Nuit, his faithful pet, appeared in the middle of the Duelling ring. Only this Nuit was not a black serpent two metres long; it was a huge towering snake double that size, and appeared as a towering column of brilliant black flames. It worked! The spell that I modified actually worked! While

Fiendfyre was too dangerous for Harry to control at this stage in his training, he had managed to find a way to control the cursed flames by margining it with his pet's consciousness, through the judicious use of runes.

'Massster, what would you have me do?' Nuit hissed at Harry questioningly. Harry laughed coldly and hissed back, 'Attack the boy. Trap him, but do not harm him unless I ssay sso.' He smirked maliciously as Fleetwood's expression, already one of surprise and terror, became even more so at Harry's use of Parseltongue.

Nuit surged forward, hissing menacingly at Fleetwood, who attempted to hex and curse him (with the Vanishing Spell, Banishing spell, Splitting Curse and even Transfiguration etc), to no avail. At last, in desperation, he simply shouted, "Aguamenti maxima!" A large torrent of water fell on Nuit, but it merely made the flames flicker slightly before Nuit lunged at the boy, irritated. Mindful however, of his master's injunction not to hurt the male, Nuit merely coiled his long body around the male and hissed at him some more, though not touching the boy.

"Well, Fleetwood, are you ready to surrender?" Harry drawled mockingly, thoroughly enjoying the sight of the older male frozen to the spot, not daring to move. The rush of power he felt from seeing a person like Fleetwood fear him was just intoxicating. He saw Fleetwood swallow twice, before seeming to get himself under control. "Yes I admit defeat. I, Oriole Pinneas Fleetwood, Head Boy and yield." Harry had to give the older male his due: even under such conditions, he was able to keep his cool.

Edgar Rosier cleared his throat. "As Oriole Pinneas Fleetwood has surrendered, I declare the winner of this duel Harrison Maximus Riddle! As agreed, six hundred points will be awarded to the Dark Court of the Night from the Jade Order of Talents."

Harry smirked. Pointing his wand at the Fiendfyre creation, he waved his wand in the runes of 'unbind' and 'control' before removing the Fiendfyre around Nuit. 'Thank you, Massster, the fire was ticklisssh.' Nuit immediately shrunk to his normal size and came back to his Master, coiling itself around Harry's torso.

Turning to the crowd, Harry raised a fist in triumph, to the roars, cheers and jeers of the crowd depending on where their loyalty lay.

As the cheers from his Group members increased in volume, Harry smirked in elation, even as his ribs started to ache once more.

That year, Harry won the Prefect elections with ease, coming in first place, ahead of even the candidates from Blood Ravens and Jade Talons, memories of his dueling triumph still fresh in the minds of all (Aleron, on Harry's orders, had run too, coming in twelfth) Most of the students it seemed, were either in awe of him, admired him or feared him. For all that Durmstrang was a school of Dark Arts, the students had never seen such powerful, majestic and creative Dark Magic being performed in duels. Even some of his own Group members seemed nervous around him, until Harry had told them that he would only unleash his powers on his enemies, so as long as they followed him, they had nothing to fear from him.

Even his roommates treated him differently; with more respect and less familiarity. Harry sighed. It was inevitable, he supposed. Thankfully, Daphne was still the same around him, her usual cheerful self whenever they were alone, even if she did treat him more politely when they were in public – probably to conform to how everyone else was treating him.

Luckily, Harry was too busy with his OWLs preparation to care much. He studied more than he had ever studied before for exams, determined to do well. By the time mid-May came around, he tackled the OWLs examinations with confidence.

A special arrangement had been made for Harry to take all his OWLs practical at once, for he still had his school examinations to contend with. Later, the twins told him that they had overheard the examiners discussing Harry. "They were still talking about you, my prince, after you had left. The examiner who examined you in Charms practical mentioned that you were the youngest to take the OWLs in five years." Septimus reported. Octavius continued without missing a beat, "Your Ancient Runes and Arithmancy examiner said you were extremely creative with your use of the runes, that she had never seen such well-timed and novel applications before in her long career. The examiner who tested you in Transfiguration insisted you were gifted in that area, to which the examiner who took you for Dark Arts retorted that you were more gifted in the Dark Arts." Harry had smirked at the twins, pleased with their report.

A week prior to the end of the school term, Harry sat on his bed staring at a piece of parchment in front of him, a letter which had just arrived out of the letter-box that was connected with his father. A letter which contained news that brought a smirk to Harry's face. Apparently, one of his father's latest recruits had been one Marcus Flint, of late, the Slytherin Captain of the Quidditch team. And Draco, after some digging, had kindly informed him ages ago that yes, Marcus Flint was related to Frederick Flint; the latter was apparently a favourite uncle.

And Harry knew how pure-blood families worked – blood was everything. So Frederick Flint, even if he was a naïve idiot who knew nothing beyond the school backyard, which he was not, would know for certainty of the Dark Lord's rise. Although Harry could not exactly use his status as the Dark Lord's son, as that was supposed to be a secret, he could finally implement his plan, which he had been developing since the start of the school year.

The problem Harry had faced had been that no matter his accomplishments, he was still a student – Frederick Flint would not have taken him seriously if he tried to intimidate him. But the fact was that Harry did not have to be the one doing the intimidation. While it was true that he could not use Karkaroff or any of his followers, that did not mean that he had no other methods. His movements crisp, precise and unhurried, Harry flicked open his trunk after hissing his password and summoned a heavy tome and a piece of parchment filled with his elegant script. Having spent the year doing a large amount of research, Harry had found a way to modify that particular ritual from the book written in Parseltongue. Most Potente Rituals of Summons...

Sunday night found Harry on the roof of the wing of the castle facing the lake, shivering slightly against the cold chill of the night air. He could barely feel his toes, even with his leather boots to protect him. After casting a warming spell on himself, Harry finally relaxed his body. Withdrawing small silver bowl and a silver knife, Harry slit his wrists and allowed droplets of his blood to flow into the bowl, before casting a replenishing charm on the bowl so that the blood filled the bowl.

Then Harry bent to his task of drawing patterns within a circle on the cobblestones of roof, using the moonlight from the full moon as his only source of light. It was all about the atmosphere really, even

though he could have cast a *lumos*. When he had finished tracing the runes of confinement and forced obedience, he stood back and started whispering words under his breath.

What Harry was doing now was Dark and dangerous, extremely so. If he failed to control the being he summoned, he would, in the worst case scenario, fall prey to the being. But Harry had confidence in himself – he had been studying this side application of Ancient Runes and Arithmancy for a while now, and he was itching to experiment. If successful, it would be the first magic that he had learnt solely on his own, without the aid of his father. Frederick Flint was merely an excuse. Though of course, he had made sure to take steps to mask the swirl of magical energy so that no teacher was alerted – what he was doing would qualify him for expulsion, even in Durmstrang, a school reputed for its tolerance of Dark Arts.

Magic coalesced and shimmered in the air as more words left Harry's mouth. At the pinnacle of the gathering of magic, Harry stopped his chanting with an abrupt wave of his wand. There was a loud crack, then mist swirled around the circle, thick, heavy and darkly threatening. By the time the mist finally cleared, all Harry could make out was a shadowy figure.

"Show yourself, imp." Harry commanded coldly, waiting to see if his summoning had worked. Using runes, the power of the full moon and the lure of his blood, he had tried to call forth a demonic imp, hoping to bind the imp to obey his orders. Harry's eyes widened as the figure unmasked itself. Standing in front of him was a human-looking male, with spiky black hair, sharp features and glowing black-pupiled eyes, dressed, of all things, in Muggle clothing of a black T-shirt, jeans and boots. This was most certainly not the imp he had summoned (imps tended to have green wrinkled skin and barely humanoid features). Glaring at the figure, he stated sharply, "Tell me who and what you are, as well as why you're here."

The man glared at Harry, his black eyes flashing. "I am Ororon Vassago, a full-fledged demon. As for why I'm here...I was just awakened from my long slumber, when I was drawn here by your power and darkness!" A snarl marred his handsome face as he spoke the last. Harry smirked as his quick mind dissected what the demon was not saying. Apparently, the summoning he had cast was strong enough, and his blood potent enough, to draw a full-fledged demon to the mortal planes.

Well, this certainly changed things. At first, he had merely wanted the demonic imp to scare Frederick Flint into submission without revealing himself, perhaps making the imp claim had been sent by the Dark Lord. That would certainly serve to intimidate and confuse Flint. But with the demon's presence, Harry could afford to show himself – this was power that even Frederick Flint, a capable adult wizard, would fear.

And Harry was not about to let such power go free. He had, after all, planned to bind the demonic imp. Even if there was a danger of his soul being devoured if he failed with the binding...Raising his wand, he pointed it at the demon. "I, Harrison Maximus Riddle, also known as Harry James Potter, do hereby bind the demon Ororon Vassago to my cause and service." Cutting his finger open with a cutting charm, he levitated three droplets of his blood into the circle, even as he poured his will and Dark magic into the binding, aiming to prove that he was strong enough to subdue the demon.

Will pitted against will as the demon tried to resist. Darkness curled into Harry's consciousness as it tried to swallow Harry's will. Harry pushed back. No, I will not allow you to triumph. Darkness changed tactic; it then took on a seductive hue as it tried to lure Harry into its embrace. I fought off the Imperius, I will not succumb. After that failure, Darkness tried to sneak into Harry, to become part of it. Smirking in triumph, Harry allowed it entry...only to entrap it within his own powers. This was the point where many wizards failed. Were they to deny the Darkness entry, they would not have the requisite Dark Magic to bind the demon. Were they to fully embrace the Darkness, they would have lost their own will. Only Harry's intuitive cunning had devised a solution to this dilemma, which he had uncovered in his research. And so, in the end, Harry won the war of wills. Pushing his newfound Dark-tinged will forward, the demon could only open his mouth helplessly and the blood droplets landed in his mouth.

There was a blinding flash of light, then, when Harry could see again, he noted that there was a black leather collar around the demon's neck, thick and with a silver buckle. Smirking, Harry raised an eyebrow challengingly at Ororon, who was futilely clawing at the buckle to no avail. At last, the demon stopped, his eyes flashing furiously. "What do you want?" He spat out.

"Come with me, Ororon." Harry's eyes glinted in anticipation as he thought of the look of fear that Frederick Flint would soon enough wear...

In his private chambers, Frederick Flint, Transfiguration Professor of Durmstrang Institute, lounged in his comfortable armchair by the flickering embers of the fireplace, his mandatory glass of red wine in his hand, as he prepared for a half-hour of reading or so before turning in.

Suddenly, Frederick Flint felt a gust of chilly air breeze through the room, an ominous bone-reaching chill that made him shiver, even though he was wrapped in thick pajamas. Eyes narrowed, Frederick Flint took in his surroundings warily, even as he unsheathed his wand from his wrist-hostler. Shadows cast by the small fire blended into the surroundings of his room, just as he liked it, yet for the first time in his life, Frederick Flint found himself wishing his taste ran to the light and airy instead of the heavy and cluttered. Books which did not fit onto his bookshelf lay about his room in stacks. Vases, statues, knick-knacks, all presents accumulated over the years from relatives, friends and acquaintances, which Frederick had never gotten around to getting rid of, littered the room. In the middle of the room was his bed, while the fireplace lay to his right and the entrance to his left...

An odd shadow near the entrance caused Frederick Flint to take another look. Barely, just barely, he could make out the shape of a man... "Very good, Professor. You have managed to detect me." Frederick startled, slightly, then snarled as a figure detached itself from the shadows to reveal one Harrison Maximus Riddle, most disliked student of all times, dressed in heavy black cloak.

"Riddle! What are you doing in my private chambers? Five hundred points from..." A wave of Riddle's hand and Frederick found himself silenced. What? How? He didn't see the boy's lips twitch at all, neither did he see him raise his wand. Before Frederick could lift the curse with his wand however, he saw the a glint in Riddle's emerald green eyes and heard him command in a cold voice, "I order you to immobilize him."

A second figure materialized out of thin air. A man, Frederick would have been tempted to say, were it not for the dark, clingy oily feeling that Frederick got from just looking at him. When the figure turned

his black eyes upon him, Frederick felt a tendril of fear creep up his spine even as he raised his wand and cast a curse. A jet of bright red light flew from the tip of his wand, only to dissipate in mid-air as the figure, who had turned to snarl at Riddle before obeying his order, lifted one finger and pointed it at him. Then, before he could cast another curse, he felt his body freezing into place. And it was not a mere full-body bind curse either. Attempted wordless magic with his wand, still within his grasp, did not work. The tendril of fear blossomed into full-blown vines creeping into his heart and strangling it in its paralyzing grasp.

Somehow, Frederick Flint knew that the second figure was not human. In his youth, he had dabbled in the Dark Arts, as with most Professors who chose to teach at Durmstrang, dabbled, but not to an extent where he could be considered a Dark Wizard...no, Frederick had deemed himself too smart for that, unwilling to sacrifice what the Dark Arts usually demanded of its practitioners...When Frederick turned his gaze to Riddle, he knew that it was filled with such horror that Riddle was aware of his knowledge.

"I see you know what this creature is, Professor." Riddle had a smirk about his face, even as he waved another hand. Swallowing, Frederick found that the silencing spell had been removed. "Demon..." he whispered. Frederick had never felt so helpless before in his entire adult life. So what if he was a Master at Transfiguration and knew how to duel proficiently? Against the power of the demon, he was a mere babe in swaddling. The demon could do anything to Flint – anything at all. He would have no defense. Hiding was not a solution; demons could break through any enchantments, even the Fidelius. Running was impossible; the demon would chase him to the very ends of the world.

Frederick Flint trembled in fear even as the suffocating Darkness emanating from the demon threatened to overwhelm him. Did Riddle know what he was doing? By Morgana's hair, what had he sacrificed in order to gain the power to summon a demon? In all the recorded history of the Wizarding World, there had only been a handful of wizards who had successfully summoned and controlled a demon. Great indeed was the risk of one who purposefully summoned a demon, and the price it demanded was even greater. And that was only if one succeeded. For those who failed, their souls were rent into fragments and never were their hide nor hair seen again...Of

course, Frederick did not know that Riddle had not gone out of its way to summon the demon, but had instead taken advantage of a quirk of fate.

"What have you done, Riddle? What have you done?" It was an echo of the words Frederick had called out so many days ago, save now, instead of anger, his words held terror, horror and disbelief. Riddle lifted an elegant eyebrow, then lifted one shoulder in casual dismissal. "That is for me to know and you to never find out, Frederick Flint...now, there's only this one little thing that I require from you..."

After that night, Frederick Flint never looked at Harry again without a flash of fear crossing his eyes. Needless to say, he never picked on Harry ever again. Indeed, it was a testament to his nerves that he could even stand to be in the same room as Harry, much less continue teaching at Durmstrang. All in all, Harry found the cowering, broken form of the much hated teacher very satisfying indeed, even more so than if he had killed the man. But no, that would have drawn too much attention to the school. And a broken man was a far sight more entertaining than a dead one.

The school term ended with the school results being disseminated. Much to his chagrin, Harry's focus on his OWLs had cause his Potions grade to slip by two positions, to fifth place, even as he remained top in all subjects, except his new elective of Necromancy, in which he was second. So. Alexei was top then, he mused. I wonder if he's really set on becoming a Necromancer?

Well, here is the long awaited finale to the Flint sub-plot. I've had many comments on how I've written Harry's interaction with Professor Flint, both positive and negative. Some think its abuse (which I disagree with by the way), some think I should have done away with him long ago, many look forward to his downfall. All I will say is, Frederick Flint is one of the forces that shape Harry's character. Without difficulties to overcome, if everything was smooth-sailing, Harry would not have grown. Please do not take it as a personal affront whenever I write about Harry suffering in some way or another...

Don't be too bothered by the demon, he won't show up much. Since he's too difficult to control, Harry will use him only when he's desperate.

Ok, back to revision!

Chapter Nineteen: Missions

Summer. A time for rest, relaxation and fun for most teenagers. Not Harry though. He spent the first week completing his homework and learning how to Apparate – though he would not be able to take the test till he was of age. Not that that would prevent him from doing so – with a genius of a Dark Lord as his father, the methods that the Ministry used to detect underage magic had not worked with him for many years.

A week into the vacation, Karkaroff had personally brought Harry's OWL results to Voldemort. Harry had been summoned to Voldemort's study as soon as that happened. For once, the Dark Lord had seemed to respect his privacy – the letter was unopened when his father had passed it to him. Harry had glanced down at the letter, then broke into a confident smirk, his eyes sparkling.

Ordinary Wizarding Levels – 1993

Durmstrang Institute

Results:

Ancient Runes – O

Arithmancy – O

Charms – O

Dark Arts – O

Transfiguration – O

Not that Harry had expected anything less. After all, those were the subjects he was most proficient in, and had received training in since his childhood. When Harry had shown the letter to his father, Voldemort had actually smiled. Harry privately thought that it was good that Karkaroff had been sent away, or no doubt he would faint from the shock of seeing Voldemort smile. "Excellent work, Harry. I think I'd have to get you the Firebolt you were eyeing after all." Harry had had to restrain himself from whooping with glee, settling instead for a polite thank you.

Then, Voldemort had enquired about Harry's school life in detail. Employing his strongest Occlumency shield, Harry kept summoning and subsequent binding of Ororon a secret (he was Slytherin enough to revel in the smug satisfaction hiding things from his father gave him). It was not as if Harry intended to use the demon much anyway, it was, simply put, too dangerous to do so unless he was in great need.

Even though Voldemort had some choice words to use about Harry's carelessness at getting caught cursing his friends' attackers, he was extremely pleased when Harry had told him of his duel with Fleetwood. "It was an exemplary usage of ancient runes, my son," he had complimented. Knowing how difficult it was to earn praise from his father, Harry had grinned smugly. However, his grin soon faded when Voldemort had then glanced at his school results slip. "I have to wonder though, at your dismal performance in Potions. If extra lessons with Severus are not working, perhaps I should hire a separate tutor for you?" Harry did not wish to lose his plaything, so he hurriedly said, "I assure you, Father, the lessons are adequate. It was merely that..." He frowned slightly as he realized that he would have to admit that the fault lay with him.

Sighing, Harry admitted, "I did not spend enough time studying for Potions." That was the bald truth. He had concentrated so much on his OWLs that it had been a miracle he still retained his top position in the European History of Magic, Astronomy, Herbology and Wards. His father raised an eyebrow. "Indeed. I trust that you will make up for that lack over summer?" Harry nodded glumly.

While he did love to tease the Potions Professor, as the difficulty level of Potions increased, the brewing process also got increasingly finicky. For Harry, who had no patience for Potions, it was tedious and mind-numbing. His moody temper was sated only by throwing subtle barbs at the Potions Master, who fought back with his own brand of sarcasm.

Lucikly for Snape, Harry had another outlet for his frustrations. Since he had sworn himself to the Dark the previous summer, the Dark Lord had authorized him to participate in raids this summer. Harry usually went with his Aunt Bella and Uncle Rody. Although they were occasionally joined by Rabastan and Barty, the other members usually consisted of lower-ranking Death Eaters who often stared at Harry suspiciously. Now standing at five foot six and with his voice in

the process of breaking, Harry was obviously a teenager. However, if anyone tried to ask questions about Harry's identity, they were often brusquely shut up by Bellatrix.

So far, even though the raids had become increasingly brazen, the incompetent Ministry still held up the official stand that it was outlawed Death Eaters who was leading the raids, much to Harry's amusement. However, there were some courageous idiots who tried to voice their opinions about the Dark Lord's return. Unfortunately for them, while the Dark Lord did not really mind being exposed at this stage, it would be more advantageous for him if he was not, so these people were made examples of. The first raid that Harry had fully participated in was one such raid.

As usual, Harry had donned his silver half-mask and black robes, leaving only his styled black hair, emerald eyes, lips and delicate jawbones visible. He was rather thankful that his father never did insist on the full white mask, for Harry found it exceedingly uncomfortable to wear. It was something Harry often teased Barty about, not that the latter would ever admit it. Still Harry would rather wear this special mask he had personally designed. Besides, silver was his favourite colour.

Harry was drawn out of his thoughts when he noticed Rodolphus Lestrangle cursing slightly under his breath as he attempted to bring down the wards on Head of Improper Use of Magic, Mafalda Hopkirk nee Ogden's home. Harry stepped up to his uncle silently. "Uncle Rody, try prodding this spot with a tinge of magic, before you do a bit of fuddling at this spot." Harry instructed, indicating the spots where he could see knots in the wards.

With a nod, Rodolphus followed Harry's instructions. A moment later, he could feel the wards weakening. "Great job, Harrison." Even through the mask, Harry could tell that Rodolphus was grinning widely. "Practise a few more times and you could take over my job." Harry inclined his head slightly, even as he pointed out, "I have an unfair advantage, Uncle Rody." Rodolphus shrugged as he brought the wards completely crashing down. "We're all born with some form of advantage over others – yours just happen to be rarer and more useful."

Meanwhile, the low ranking Death Eaters watched the exchange with narrowed eyes. Rumours of a teenage prodigy with a special

silver mask had spread amongst the rank-and-file. Some noted that he addressed Bellatrix and Rodolphus as aunt and uncle, and wondered if he was related to them, others countered with the argument that even if he was, he would not have been treated so differently. No, he had to be special in some other way.

Harry kept his senses on high alert as he followed behind Bellatrix into the house, after she had blasted down the door. It was a highly dramatic gesture, albeit a necessary one. Who knew what curses and wards the door held? Far better to take it down with raw power than to try disarming them gently. Sometimes, it made Harry wonder just how much raw power Bellatrix had, if she was able to spare so much just to get rid of a door. Of course, Harry was certain that it paled in comparison to his father's...and maybe even his own. His powers were still growing by leaps and bounds, so who knew what level it would reach when he finally reached his magical majority? It was a pity really, that Harry could not see his own aura, and thus, his level of power.

Following behind her, Harry took in the homely, cozy surroundings quickly while keeping his ears peeled. Hearing a small sound to his right, he whirled and pointed his wand at a...bird. Or more precisely, a barn owl. Harry shrugged then cast the killing curse at the animal. His father had been rather specific. No survivors were allowed, unless they had something to offer to warrant them being taken prisoner.

Behind him, Harry heard one of the Death Eaters gasp. The man was probably stunned that Harry was able to cast the curse at his age, albeit it being on an animal. Harry had yet to cast it on a human, though he idly wondered if today was the day he would become a killer.

Entering the living room, Harry saw Bellatrix dueling a wispy witch with flyaway grey hair and a grizzled wizard sporting a thick grey beard, while sounds of approaching footsteps could be heard from a nearby staircase. To the Death Eaters who had come in through the front door with him, he ordered, "You three, take care of the stairs." Although one Death Eater opened his mouth as if to argue, his companion quickly tugged him aside, even as Harry went to help Bellatrix.

"May I, Aunt Bella?" Harry enquired politely, as if it were any other normal occasion. Not waiting for a reply, he immediately began dueling the wizard, whom he guessed was Mafalda Hopkirk's husband. "Of course, my dear, go right ahead!" Bellatrix sang, even as she ferociously resumed battling Mafalda Hopkirk.

It was rather exhilarating actually, to fight outside of the formal rules of a formal duel. With no spectators and no need to hold back, Harry was soon interspersing his offensive spells with all the dark curses and hexes in his repertoire. Some curses would get him expelled at even Durmstrang, were he ever stupid enough to use it there - curses meant to incapacitate, hurt and torture.

William Hopkirk, hale and hearty albeit retired ex-Auror, frowned as his opponent began to use dark and dangerous spells. Having heard his opponent's breaking voice and observed his slim figure, William had come to the conclusion that his opponent was a child barely into puberty; at most, he was a teenager. The Dark Lord is subjugating children now? How could he stoop so low? William's thoughts were filled with disgust. Children were meant to be protected, meant to learn and flourish in peace. He had seen too much innocence lost in the previous war against the Dark Lord, a decade and more ago...his own brother had fought and died when he was sixteen...he was not about to condone the destruction of yet another innocent.

William was reluctant to fight with the boy, but when the boy had started attacking him, he had defended himself. "Protego! Impedimenta! Petrificus Totalus!" Then, as the duel heated up, William's jaws dropped. How could a child like him be so adept at dueling? Back in his time, he had seen Aurors who were less adept than the boy was. By now, William was no longer holding back; he could not afford to. He gave as good as he got, casting stupefys, incendios and other offensive spells easily, even as dark slashing and pain-causing curses flew back at him.

As a sickly yellow-coloured spell came hurtling his way, William leapt aside stiffly, his aching joints protesting against the abuse. Wincing at the loud explosion behind him, he could not stand it any longer. This child was being corrupted, children like him should not be fighting at raids! "Child," he exclaimed in his reedy voice. "You should not be here! You should be in school...learning...playing...do not be fooled by You-know-who!"

For a moment, William thought that he had gotten through to the child, then his opponent's lips curled into a smirk. "It's summer, old man. And I am not a child!" The last was said with a deadly whisper, right before the teenager shot out three curses in succession from his wand. William hastily conjured his strongest shield spell. Yet, such was the power of the boy's spell that William felt his shield shattering after the second curse, leaving the third curse to strike him straight in the chest.

His wand flying from his hand, William flew backwards before falling to the ground with a sickening thud. Dimly, he thought that his ribs might have cracked from the impact. Then, he saw the boy aimed his wand at him with a smirk on his lips. With sudden clarity, his life on this plane of existence was going to end. "I'll wait for you on the other side, Maffy..." William whispered as a bright green flash exploded in his eyes. Then, he knew no more.

Harry watched as life disappeared from the man's eyes after he had cast the Killing Curse. He had done so without hesitation. It had been instinctive, after all those lectures from his father about never leaving an enemy alive, for him to cast the curse at the man after he had fallen. For a moment, the only thoughts filling his head were of shocked disbelief. I killed a man. I killed a person. I am a killer. Aware that his heart was beating rather too rapidly, Harry took a deep breath to calm down. So what? He scolded himself lightly. You knew the consequences when you learnt to cast the Avada Kedavra. You knew you would be using it in battle; you knew you would be using it to kill. True. But he did not actually know that it would be like this. Practicing on all those small animals had not prepared him for the shock of his first human kill in the slightest. A flash of green light and suddenly, a human life was snuffed from the face of Earth. Just like that...

Was this how his mother had died all those years ago? Harry pondered on that dazedly even as he took in the carnage around him – Bellatrix had defeated Mafalda Hopkirk and was currently playing with her, while the other Death Eaters were dueling three males of varying ages, probably the Hopkirk's children. The oldest looked to be in his mid-twenties, while the youngest seemed to be barely out of school.

With half of his mind still dwelling in shock on the death of the wizard, Harry did not concentrate much on the others until an agonized

masculine scream drew him out of his thoughts. Frowning, Harry noted that one of the Death Eaters had fallen to the floor, cradling his right wrist in his arms...it took Harry a few more moments to realize the Death Eater was bleeding, because his wrist had been completely severed from his body.

It was then that one important truth struck home; kill or be killed. Just like it was a choice of hurting others or being hurt, killing could be perceived in the same way. Harry had never realized how true that maxim was, until confronted with it today. If Harry had not killed the wizard, he had no doubts that he would have been killed by him. Or perhaps captured and sent to Azkaban, which was a fate worse than death, in Harry's opinion.

Squashing his doubts temporarily by virtue of his Occlumency skill and sheer stubbornness, Harry reentered the battle. "Heal him, you!" He called to one Death Eater – the one who had wisely tugged his companion away. Harry was not proficient with healings spells; it was usually the resident Healer or his father who healed him when he got hurt during training. As such, he chose to focus his attentions on dueling the brothers, allowing all his doubts and uncertainty to wash away in the exhilaration of a duel. Back and forth he danced, with another Death Eater at his side. Seeing as the other Death Eater was merely average at dueling, Harry took on the brunt of the attack from the trio. He did not mind though. A savage grin splashed across his face as he shot emerald green flames at his opponents.

Then finally, an opening. The youngest male stumbled over a piece of broken furniture on the ground. "Avada Kedavra!" Harry shouted, aiming the curse at the man. A jet of green light flew out of his wand tip and the person keeled over, dead. Although there were other ways to kill, Harry could not help but rejoice in using the Killing curse; it sent a huge rush of darkness through his very core that was simply exhilarating.

"NO! Vespini!" His brothers cried out in despair. Without stopping to gloat, Harry immediately turned on the eldest male and attacked vigorously. Still shocked by his brother's death, the eldest male concentrated too much on Harry and soon left his flank wide open to attack from the Death Eater beside Harry, who aimed a deadly curse at him.

Another one down! Harry smirked as he launched an attack on his last opponent, caught up in battle lust. Merlin, but it felt so good just to let go and enjoy the battle! Harry found that his senses became hyper-alert as adrenaline rushed through him. He whirled, he spun, he dodged as he shot spells and curses at the male. At last, the male, panting heavily, dodged a fraction too slowly, and down he went. Harry laughed coldly as he cast the killing curse once more, delighting in the power rush he felt. All doubts had fled from his mind as the euphoria of the battle took him.

As the adrenaline and power rush left him however, Harry suddenly felt extremely tired. Stupid! He berated himself mentally; his father had warned him not to overuse the Unforgiveables, for they were a huge drain on magic. And yet here he was, a beginner, using it three times in the span of an hour – it was no wonder that he felt slightly woozy. Retrieving a vial of Invigoration Draught from his pockets, Harry unshrunk the Unbreakable vial before gulping down the potion. Its effect was immediate – he immediately felt revitalized.

However, Harry knew that this type of potions had strong side-effects; he would have to rest within the hour or he would pass out stone-cold. Looking around, Harry noticed that Bellatrix had killed off Mafalda Hopkins some time ago, presumably during his duel with the brothers. She cackled slightly when she caught Harry's eyes. "Very nice, Harrison! Three kills on your very first time, Aunt Bella is very impressed." Stalking towards him, she lightly petted his shoulders, offering comfort through her touch when she was too proud to say it.

As Harry flashed a grateful smile at her, he saw Rodolphus and another Death Eater finally entering the living room. Rodolphus shrugged slightly, "Had to take care of a middle-aged couple back there. Apparently the Hopkirks had guests tonight." His eyes took in the carnage in the living room critically, then he said, "That should be all. Shall we, Bella?" Bellatrix nodded at her husband. "Let's go."

Once outside, Bellatrix smirked. "The Dark Lord wants them as a very visible example. Thus, there will be no burning of their house. Harrison dear, would you do the honours?" Harry returned his aunt's smirk. "Of course, Aunt Bella. Morsmordre!"

As the Dark Mark appeared in the sky, all the Death Eaters and Harry apparated from the scene.

That had been the first raid that Harry had participated in. When he had sat in on Bellatrix's and Rodolphus' report afterwards, he found that Voldemort had been impressed with his use of the killing curse.

After Voldemort had dismissed his followers, the Dark Lord had turned to Harry. "Are you alright, my son? It was, after all, your first human kill." Harry had nodded, grateful for his father's concern. Unlike most parents, Voldemort limited the display of his concern to that question and statement. Sometimes, Harry wished that he had a father who would hug him tightly when he needed it. The only hug he ever recalled was the one he had initiated when his father had first broached the topic of his adoption. But that was not the Dark Lord's way. No, his father showed his affections, as much as he was capable of feeling, in other ways. And Harry would not trade his father for anyone in the world.

"I will be, Father. Please, do not worry on my behalf." Harry had hesitated for a while, before tentatively querying, "May I know about your first kill, Father?" His father had always been leery of regaling Harry with tales of his past, and understandably so, considering his upbringing at the orphanage.

To Harry's surprise, Voldemort had not changed the subject, as he usually did when he was unwilling to talk to Harry about something, but had told Harry the story of the Chamber of Secrets, and how he had killed a Mudblood with a Basilisk when he was in his sixth year at Hogwarts. He had also informed Harry that that was when he made his first Horcrux, a diary which was currently safely hidden.

Harry had smiled at the tale. It was always struck Harry as funny, how he was the one Horcrux not safely locked away. Even Nagini was constantly kept by his father's side. Harry knew his father was rather controlling when it came to such things; he rarely, if ever, trusted anyone with much. It was a measure of how much the man truly treated Harry like his son, as opposed to just a pet or a precious treasure, that Voldemort had revealed the fact that Harry was his Horcrux to his son, and thereafter trusted Harry to keep himself safe by allowing him the freedom to attend school, and at Durmstrang no less.

When Voldemort had finally bid Harry goodnight, Harry had felt a small weight lift off his chest. Yes, he was quite willing to kill, and even murder, if it would help his father in any way.

After Harry's fourteenth birthday, he accompanied his Uncle Lucius and Rosier on a negotiation trip with the largest werewolf pack in Britain; Fenrir Greyback's pack. Before they left, Lucius had given Harry a run-down of the werewolves' current situation; apparently, many of werewolves under Greyback both hated and feared him, a fact that would make Greyback easier to manipulate as he had to be concerned with not losing their support. Harry had idly wondered if his father ever had to be concerned with such a problem. But no, none of the Death Eaters hated his father, though all of them feared him to some extent, even the most fanatically loyal. Harry, secure in the knowledge that he had the Dark Lord's affection, knew that he would never fear his father.

Well, that was food for thought for another time. Harry focused his mind on the upcoming meeting with the werewolves, even as Harry, together with Lucius and Rosier, entered a dimly lit cavern with hanging brown stalacites above a round oaken table in the middle of the room.

Remus Lupin hovered in the background of the meeting like a shadow. His pack's alpha, the vicious werewolf Fenrir Greyback, was too busy posturing in front of the Death Eaters to take much notice of the half-dozen werewolves who were in the meeting room as well. Remus had traded places with another werewolf who was supposed to be here by promising that werewolf two months supply of the Wolfsbane Potion (an extremely rare and expensive potion that Remus was planning to obtain from Snape through Albus Dumbledore), for he was not high-ranking enough in the pack to be invited to the meeting.

He noticed that seven Death Eaters had entered the room. Four were clearly bodyguards, arranging themselves around the other three. The one standing in the middle was recognizable by his scent as one Lucius Malfoy. How Remus yearned to expose the man to the Ministry! But who would take the word of a werewolf over that of an aristocrat like Malfoy? Furthermore, Remus was sure that Malfoy would claim to be under the Imperius again, like he had at the end of the war. Remus did not recognize the second man, but it was the third who intrigued him. From the boy's voice and gestures, Remus

could tell that he was a teenager. The question was, what was a teenager doing at such an important meeting? Surely it wasn't Malfoy's son?

Remus studied the teen closely throughout the meeting. Hooded and cloaked as he was, Remus could only make out the silver half-mask on the teen's face, as well as the green eyes, full lips and a rather regal chin. As well as a vaguely familiar scent...try as he might though, Remus could not place it.

He noted that the boy seemed to be no amateur at politics – on a few occasions, he would chip in his opinions, in such a way which always seemed so reasonable that Greyback had no choice but to agree to it. Other than that however, he seemed content to allow his elders to lead the discussion, even as his emerald green eyes seemed to rove around the room. Remus stiffened as the boy met his gaze, then, seemingly bored, looked away again. Remus could not help but feel this niggling sensation...with a resigned shrug, he shoved that feeling into the back of his mind even as he paid close attention to the discussion taking place. After all, now that it was clear that the werewolved would never join the Light, Albus was depending on him to find out as much as he could about the terms of alliance they had with the Dark.

By the end of the two hours of negotiation, Greyback had agreed to join the Dark Lord, with precious little conditions.

"Good work, Uncle Lucius. I am sure that Father will be most pleased with the results," Harry complimented Lucius during dinner, just before they headed home. Lucius inclined his head slightly, replying with a raised eyebrow, "You did well too, Young Master. I must admit, your small nudges helped sped things along considerably." Harry smirked and pointed out. "I had good teachers." Indeed, since young, Harry had been exposed to politics by both his father and Lucius; one reason why he had not taken the subject as an elective was because he already had the best teachers at home.

"I am proud to have you as my student, Young Master," Lucius finally replied in an uncharacteristic lowering of his usual aristocratic mask. He raised his glass, "To the success of our mission." Harry echoed him with a smug smile.

A few days before the school year started, the Dark Lord sent Harry on a raid – the first raid that Harry was allowed to lead. Harry acquitted himself splendidly; bring down the wards easily and generally wiping out the entire family of one Hestia Jones, a new member of the Order. Voldemort had told Harry that Jones herself was not to be touched – he intended for her to suffer the agony of losing family members as a result of her choice. Harry had nodded in understanding; during the raid, he allowed Aunt Bella free reign with the youngest members of the Jones family. By the time Bellatrix was done, Harry had been certain that Jones would get the message.

Ah, Harry's first human kill. I'm not really into angsty Harry, so I've pretty much touched lightly on Harry's reaction, or rather, his lack there-of. By this time in his life (unlike just after he was rescued from the Dursleys), Harry knows what right and wrong are, or rather, what the general populace think are right and wrong. That explains his doubts at first. Of course, having been brought up by the Dark Lord, his own sense of morality is pretty different. And that explains his lack of guilt in the end. Does that make him a psychopath or sociopath? I wonder...

This is just one side of the summer holidays, I'll be presenting the other side in the next chapter. As for what it's about, well, I'm sure you intelligent readers out there already have an idea:)

Chapter Twenty: Present

On Harry's birthday, Draco had sent Harry only a letter with the Malfoy family's handsome eagle owl, instead of the usual parcel consisting of Harry's present.

Harrison,

Happy Birthday! Now before you start wondering about your present, allow me to inform you about the 422nd Quidditch World Cup final to be held on the 22 August. Knowing you, it is unlikely that you have even touched the Sports section of the Daily Prophet once this summer, so you might not be aware of this upcoming special event. As such, it is my duty as a Malfoy to extend an invitation to you to watch the World Cup with my family and I in the Top Box (where else?).

You're also invited to stay at the Malfoy Manor from 20th to 25th August (Theo will be coming too, though he will be seating with his family during the World Cup itself – they didn't quite manage to get seats at the Top Box). Do try to persuade your father to allow you to enjoy your birthday present. I shall await your reply.

Draco

Harry had snorted at the tone of the letter, which was so quintessentially Draco, before spending the next week persuading his father to allow him to attend the Quidditch World Cup – he was sick of staying at the Manor and only being allowed out for missions. However, the Dark Lord had been planning something for the Quidditch World Cup, and he did not wish for Harry to participate; it was only when Harry had sworn that he would stay safe and out of the way that Voldemort had changed his mind (Harry privately suspected that he was one of the two beings alive who could get the Dark Lord to change his mind once Voldemort had made a decision, the other being Nagini).

So it was with a light heart that Harry set off for Malfoy Manor on the morning of the twentieth.

"Harrison, it's good to see you again." Draco offered his hand warmly when Harry stepped out of the fireplace. "For a week there, I

thought the Dark Lord would not allow you to attend." Harry smiled wryly, "He almost didn't, but he relented after my constant nagging."

Theo snickered softly, "I'd love to see you nag at the Dark Lord." Laughing, Harry followed Draco to his room. "If I ever did that in public, all I'll get is the Cruciatus. Father only ever tolerates it when we're alone. And that's what I did – ambush him at every opportunity to plead my case. Though I do wonder about what he's planning to do at the World Cup."

Opening the door to his room, Draco shrugged. "Whatever it is, Father is involved. Mr. Nott too, if what Theo says is of any indication. And it'll happen on the night of the World Cup – Father told me to hide at the forest near the campsite that night." At Theo's nod of agreement, Harry cocked his head slightly. "Well, whatever it is, if our fathers do not wish for us to get involved, I say we should just sit back and relax."

Draco and Theo nodded solemnly. Then, the atmosphere lightened as the three boys exchanged stories of their adventures in school, which of course ended in a discussion of how to gain more followers for the Dark Lord.

"You've been doing pretty well, Draco. Most of the Slytherin graduates from Hogwarts that joined the Dark Lord over summer cited you as the person who referred them. And apparently, only those that are of a certain calibre joined up this year, as compared to previous years when there were some riff-raff who merely wanted power and fame. You did a good job of sifting out the riff-raff." Harry commented, clapping his friend lightly on the shoulder. Draco smirked, preening slightly before drawling, "Well, I wasn't going to let you hog all the glory, was I, Harrison? If you can recruit followers, so can I. Although I am still not able to approach students from the other houses." He turned serious at the last statement, looking slightly troubled.

Theo shrugged slightly, "It isn't Draco's fault, Harrison. Professor Snape keeps a pretty close eye on us Slytherins. And since you told us that his loyalty might be suspect, we dare not allow him to have suspicions of us. At school, Draco presents the image of the Slytherin bully, tormenting the Gryffindors to deceive Snape and Dumbledore into thinking that he's merely an arrogant prat who uses his power trivially. Although I think he sometimes enjoy his role too

much..." Draco tossed Theo a glare at that statement, even as Harry snickered.

Turning serious again, Harry nodded. "I understand. How about the Ravensclaws though? They would be most susceptible after the Slytherins." Draco and Theo exchanged glances. "Well, we sort of have a study group with some of those in our year, but we do not have an excuse to approach the seventh-years." At that, Harry furrowed his brow thoughtfully, before relaxing. "Well, there's no point thinking too much about it. Just do whatever you can without drawing suspicions to yourself for now."

The day of the Quidditch World Cup dawned bright and clear. By mid-morning, Harry, Draco and Theo were assembled at the front hall of the Malfoy Manor, all dressed in their best Muggle clothing (a Ministry stipulation that had Lucius sneering) – Draco had chosen a pale grey silk shirt that brought out his eyes and white dress pants, Theo a deep bronze shirt that complemented his lightly tanned skin and dark brown pants while Harry chose a bright emerald green satin dress shirt with jet black dress pants.

"Very well chosen, boys." Narcissa Malfoy indicated their clothes and smiled at the young men as they all offered her a polite good morning. Narcissa had chosen to wear an elegant white dress while Lucius had worn a long black coat over his dress shirt; attires that were acceptable in both wizarding and Muggle fashion.

Lucius took a pinch of Floo powder from a beautiful black vase before throwing it into the white marble fireplace. "Malfoy tent," he called out, vanishing in a flash of green fire. Draco informed Harry and Theo smugly, "The tent has already been set up by the house-elves. It has a fireplace, so we're taking the Floo. Much more convenient than a Portkey. Father checked – we'd have to wake up at seven in the morning to catch the one in our district!"

Harry tossed Draco a teasing smirk. "And we all know that Malfoys do not get out of bed until nine o'clock unless...ouch." Mock-glaring at Draco, Harry rubbed the spot where Draco had punched him. "Draco," Narcissa frowned slightly. Draco instantly said, "Do not worry, Mother, we will behave appropriately in public." Harry and Theo instantly brought out their cultured masks and inclined their heads elegantly at Narcissa's lingering glance.

Five minutes later, Harry blinked up at inside of the Malfoy tent, which did not look like one at all. A tent, that was. White marble floor, white leather or wooden furniture and crystal chandeliers – in fact Harry thought it looked like the mini-version of the Malfoy Manor. "The six bedrooms are through that corridor there, dears." Narcissa indicated with a graceful gesture. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I believe I will take a rest before the match. The house-elves will bring luncheon at about noon, so please be ready by then."

Lucius smiled fondly at his wife before bidding the teenagers goodbye, indicating that he would be catching up with some colleagues. Harry, Draco and Theo were left staring at each other. "Colleagues? Or colleagues? Which do you reckon, Draco?" Harry asked curiously. Draco shrugged. "Probably Ministry ones? This is a good opportunity to make political connections after all. And Mother will probably be up and about soon enough, inviting all her lady friends to gossip. She might request our presence if we're still here then. Shall we leave before that happens?"

Harry nodded decisively, then led the way outside. Once outside, he looked back, raising an eyebrow at what he saw. In the place of the Malfoy tent stood an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, with several live peacocks tethered at the entrance. "Slightly ostentatious, isn't it?" Harry jibed gently, well aware of his friend's tendency to show off.

Draco smirked and waved his hand at the broad expanse of tents that covered the field. "It puts the plebeians in their place." Both Harry and Theo laughed at that statement.

"Let's go visit our friends." Harry decided a moment later, after the novelty of looking at the various highly-decorated tents had worn off. Along the way, as they passed by salesmen touting souvenirs, Harry, Draco and Theo purchased a pair of Omnioculars each, but that was all. It wouldn't be proper after all, for young men of their standing to be seen with roaring Bulgarian scarves or pointed green hats with dancing shamrocks, although Harry caught Draco eyeing a figurine of Viktor Krum.

"Don't bother." Harry commented. "He's a grumpy person, but if you really want to meet him, you should ask Alexei to introduce you." Draco snorted inelegantly at that. "Alexei will probably bite off my head if I do that – he hates it when others talk about his famous

brother. Can't say I blame him; if I had a brother who overshadowed me that much, I suspect that brother will not live till the age of majority." Shaking his head slightly, Harry quickly put up privacy charms. After all, it wouldn't do for them to be caught talking so casually about murder, even if Harry knew Draco was not exaggerating. "You like to be at the center of attention at all times; we get that. There's no need for such murderous talk out in the open though." Harry rolled his eyes lightly at his best friend, who shrugged slightly sheepishly. Theo watched his friends with amusement before stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Do you think Alexei will even come to the match?"

Draco looked faintly scandalized at the thought that Alexei would not do so. "It's the Quidditch World Cup! Even if it were my worst enemy playing, I'd come to the match." Harry's emerald eyes glinted with humour as he laughed at that. "I can't imagine Weasley, Longbottom or the Mudblood playing at a World Cup anytime soon, can you?" The trio exchanged amused glances, then burst into laughter at that very thought.

In the end, while they did not see Alexei, they did meet Tracey, the Withers twins, Pansy, Blaise and Daphne, who proudly introduced Harry to her parents and younger sister. "Ah, Astoria, isn't it? Second year at Hogwarts this year right?" Little Astoria Greengrass, who had the same golden waves as her sister but had greyish-hazel eyes instead of her sister's greyish-blue, nodded shyly and blushed prettily. "You have two beautiful daughters, Mr. Greengrass," Harry told the older man politely. Mr. Greengrass beamed. "Thank you, Young Master." Harry watched with sardonic amusement as the Death Eater tried his best to flatter Harry. Thank Merlin Daphne did not inherit his obsequiousness!

Then, Harry and Draco returned to a sumptuous lunch at the Malfoy tent while Theo wandered off to find his parents. Before they knew it, it was time for the Quidditch match.

While travelling through the path of the nearby woods to get to the Quidditch stadium, Harry noted that crowds were cheering, laughing, shouting and singing very loudly, much to his disgust. While Harry understood that the Quidditch World Cup was a highly exciting event, it wouldn't hurt for British wizards to at least show a proper sense of decorum, especially in front of the whole world who had gathered to

watch the World Cup. Judging by the sneer on Draco's face, his friend shared his sentiments.

Finally arriving at the stadium, Harry and Draco exchanged glances of irritation at the huge hoarde of wizards and witches swarming the entrance. Thankfully, after many well-placed elbows at the throng of people, Lucius managed to offer his tickets to the Ministry witch at the entrance. "Top box, Mr. Malfoy. Straight upstairs, please." The witch made an effort to be polite even as she shot harassed looks at the crowd that was forming behind them.

Lucius returned a nod somewhat coolly before heading up to the top box with the others following behind. Upon arriving at the Top Box, Harry noted that there were around twenty seats arranged in two rows, with the front row being half filled up with...Weasleys. Harry noticed a balding man, who had to be the patriarch of the family and six red-headed males...of whom the youngest was the boy Harry had met in Flourish and Botts two years prior – Ronald Weasley. Beside him, chattering away animatedly, were two girls – the Mudblood and another red-head, probably his sister, while a rather chubby, pudgy boy (Longbottom, Harry recalled from Draco's descriptions) looked on cheerfully.

Or at least until the boy caught sight of Draco and Harry – both looked rather striking in their clothes, it was rather impossible not to notice them – at which point his smile vanished. Clutching at the youngest male Weasley's arm, Longbottom stared at Draco and Harry, even as the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, spotted Lucius and greeted him.

Lucius returned the Minister's greetings politely, shaking his hands "Ah, Fudge. How are you? I don't think you've met my wife, Narcissa? Or our son, Draco? And this is Mr. Harrison Riddle, top student of his year at Durmstrang."

Fudge smiled and bowed to Narcissa, delivering courteous words, before eyeing Harry curiously. "Durmstrang eh? I daresay you learn loads of stuff at school?" Harry nodded charmingly to Fudge. "Of course, Minister. Each of the schools have their strengths, after all. The education that Durmstrang offers surpasses Hogwarts in some pertinent areas." Harry flashed a smirk at Weasley and Longbottom, both of whom looked furious at this slur to their school. Nearby, the

Mudblood had finally noticed Harry's presence; she paled, no doubt remembering their meeting two years ago.

Laughing heartily, Fudge chortled, "Well, well, nicely put Mr. Riddle. Though we all think that our school is best, eh? Each school have their strengths, each school have their strengths!" He went on to introduce Lucius to the Bulgarian Minister of Magic and then...Arthur Weasley.

Harry fought to restrain his smile as Lucius aimed a snide remark jibing at his enemy's wealth, or lack thereof, at Weasley. Then, as the youngest Weasley male opened his mouth, presumably to defend his father, Harry turned his back pointedly on the boy and went to his seat.

Thereafter, for an enjoyable three hours, Harry put all thoughts of Weasleys out of his mind as he exchanged quiet comments with Draco about the match and generally enjoyed himself thoroughly. Although he had not been a huge fan of Quidditch when he was young, after a few years playing as a seeker on the Night Serpents' team, he had come to have a soft spot for the sport.

"Ten galleons on Bulgaria's win," Draco whispered excitedly as the match started, careful not to let his parents hear him. It wouldn't do after all, for the Malfoy heir to be caught gambling in public. Harry rolled his eyes slightly before waving his hand. "Fine. You're on."

After the match ended amidst much cheering and shouting from the crowd, Harry stuck his hand out smugly, watching Draco's reaction. Mindful of being in public, Draco merely mouthed the word "Later", with a sidelong glance at his parents. Harry smirked. If he chose to press the issue now...Eyes widening, Draco looked pleadingly at Harry. In the end, Harry relented with a shrug. He supposed he could find his fun elsewhere, seeing as how Draco had given him such a nice birthday present this year.

Returning to the Malfoy tent, Harry watched with amusement as Lucius tried to hint that Draco and Harry should return to the Malfoy Manor via Floo. Harry smirked, holding up a hand to forestall him. "Uncle Lucius, I know you're planning something; Father told me as much. I was told not to interfere, but that doesn't mean I don't want to watch. You go ahead with whatever you're planning – Draco and I will be in the woods, watching."

At Lucius' worried look, Harry added, "You know I can defend myself if needs be. Don't worry, I'll protect Draco." At Draco's look of outrage, Harry's smirk widened. Lucius appeared as though he wished to protest some more, then he thought better of it and nodded. "Very well, Young Master. I will excuse myself now."

Harry and Draco made their way to the woods casually, finding a spot on the path through the woods that was just beside a gap in the trees; it offered a good spot through which to watch the show.

They did not have long to wait. After a few minutes, pandemonium erupted. Tents were overturned, wizards and witches were running in all directions, shrieking, screaming at the top of their lungs. In the centre of the chaos were a group of Death Eaters in full Death Eater regalia, laughing and cackling as they dangled a few bodies in the air.

Harry watched with amusement as they taunted the victims, before flipping the woman over in midair. So these are Muggles... He glanced at Draco, noting the vicious enjoyment in his eyes. "See anything you like?" Harry teased. Draco made a gagging motion, then turned back to the scene. He couldn't help but frown slightly. Harry noticed and prodded him. "What's wrong?" Draco shrugged slightly, then slowly said, "Well, while the scene out there is enjoyable and all, I'm just wondering..."

"How it'd be of any help to my father's plans right? Aside from causing fear and panic in the populace." Harry finished, smirking. It was good to see that Draco had brains underneath his arrogant exterior, even if he hid it well most of the time. "I imagine that what we're seeing is only the distraction. The real mission, whatever it is, would be more subtly carried out."

Draco nodded in agreement, then froze. Harry heard it too; four sets of footsteps and loud voices nearing. Leaning nonchalantly against the nearest tree trunk, he watched as Draco copied his actions. Now, depending on who the people were, they could claim to be hiding from the Death Eaters...

Harry heard a large thump. Activating his magic-seeing sight, he saw a faint reddish outline of the aura of a human figure sprawled on the ground several feet away from Draco and him. Then he heard a

shrill, anxious female voice. "What happened? Ron, where are you? Oh, this is stupid – Lumos!"

A wand lit up somewhere beyond the trees, casting its narrow beam across the path. Harry switched off his sight and noted that the boy sprawled across the path was none other than one Ronald Weasley, while the girl who had uttered the spell was the Mudblood Granger. "Tripped over a tree-root," Weasley grumbled under his breath before stumbling to his feet. Behind the Mudblood, two other anxious faces peered out; Longbottom and...Martin Potter.

Harry inclined his head slightly when Draco gave a questioning glance; it wouldn't hurt to have some fun after all. Starting off, Draco drawled, "With feet that size, hard not to." Harry snickered at that; Draco's insults were often eerily accurate. The quartet turned in their direction, stunned looks of surprise on their faces.

Weasley recovered first. He growled out, "Fuck off, Malfoy!" Harry narrowed his eyes. Could a person be anymore crass? Coldly, Harry sneered malovently, "Watch your language, Weasley. Hurry along now, you wouldn't like her spotted, would you?" He jerked his head in the Mudblood's direction.

"What's that supposed to mean?" snapped Granger densely. Draco's grey eyes glittered with cold amusement as he spelt it out for the Mudblood, "Granger, they're after Muggles. Do you want to be showing off your knickers in mid-air? Because if you do, hang around...they're moving this way, and it would give us all a laugh." Harry smirked at that – Draco did always know how to follow his lead in such things.

"Hermione's a witch, stupid." Martin Potter snarled, his hazel eyes flashing slightly. Harry sneered at his biological brother, even as his hackles rose at that childish insult. "You really shouldn't interrupt a conversation, boy. Didn't your parents teach you any manners? And if you think they cannot spot a Mudblood, stay where you are." Harry added caustically. Even as Harry said the words, he winced mentally. He should have had more control over his temper than that...had it been anyone else, Harry would have shrugged off the insult. But it was Potter, Martin Potter who had said those words to him...the brother he never knew...Potter glared at him and reached for his pocket, withdrawing his wand and pointing it at Harry. Before Potter could say anything however...

"You watch your mouth!" Weasley shouted, turning a deep shade of red that clashed with his hair. Harry smirked, wondering if Weasley or Potter would be as foolish as they looked and start a fight right here and now. He was rather bored; it would be a nice distraction. Fingering his wand carelessly, he tossed a predatory grin at both Weasley and Potter.

Apparently, the Mudblood was smarter than she looked, for she immediately grabbed Potter's arm to prevent him from doing anything foolish, even as she shot Weasley a pleading look. Well, well. Someone seems to have grown a backbone since two years ago, hmm? The person facing him now was so much more intriguing than the one who had run crying from the bookshop two years prior.

There came a bang from the other side of the trees that was louder than anything they had heard; Harry heard several screams. He exchanged feral grins with Draco. "Scare easily don't they?" Harry drawled lazily. Draco smirked, casting a glance at the four. "Well, at least they're intelligent enough to be afraid, unlike them. I suppose your daddy had to tell you all to hide? What's he up to – oh, I know, trying to rescue the Muggles?"

"Where're your parents?" Weasley snapped back. "Out there wearing masks, are they?" Draco and Harry exchanged amused glances – Weasley would never know how close he had come to the truth with that sentence. "Well...if they were, I would not be likely to tell you, would I?" Draco replied, smirking, even as Harry toyed with his wand idly, wondering if he could get away with cursing them. He was getting rather bored with the conversation.

The Mudblood cast fearful glances at Harry and Draco, then she dragged the quartet off. Harry tucked his wand away regretfully, then paused thoughtfully, before casting a wandless tripping jinx in their direction. He heard a loud crash and muttered curses – Weasley had tripped over yet another tree trunk again.

The next day, Harry glanced at the Daily Prophet. It appeared that he was correct after all – a few people had died amidst the chaos at the World Cup: a few foreign Ministry members and one known member of the Order of the Phoenix. Harry smirked. The Ministry of Magic would have a lot of trouble smoothing over things now, Harry

had no doubt. He smirked – truly, he had thoroughly enjoyed Draco's present this year.

The mood at the Order of the Phoenix headquarters, the kitchen of No.12 Grimmauld Place, was somber. Albus Dumbledore heaved a mental sigh. Voldemort had yet won another round, it seemed, with the chaos at the Quidditch World Cup a couple of days ago. Across the table, Kingsley Shacklebolt was giving his report, concluding with a "Dedalus Diggle was caught up in the chaos. Having been separated from his wand, he was soon trampled to death by the crowd. That's the Ministry's official report. However, all evidence points to the fact that when he tried to duel the Death Eaters who came after him, he was disarmed and Imperiused, manipulated to stand in the way of the crowd."

"He was a good man," Hestia Jones, a young black-haired woman with rosy cheeks, one of their newest members, sniffed slightly. Ah yes. Dumbledore recalled that Hestia was one of those whom Dedalus had recruited. His kindly and excitable nature had made him one of the best in such a task. He had also been one of the few who had had no words of censure when it had been revealed that Dumbledore's carelessness had led to Harry Potter's disappearance.

It was time to focus everyone's attention away from their grief. "Yes Hestia, he was." Dumbledore said softly. Then, he increased his volume as he allowed the twinkle to fade from his eyes. "They were all good men, all of them, whom Voldemort murdered, at a whim. The Bulgarian Ministry members had no quarrel with Voldemort – their murders were meant to make things harder for our own Ministry. International relationships will be strained; the Ministry's efforts would have to be put into repairing them, drawing their focus away from other things. It is also unlikely that the Tri-wizard Tournament will be able to be held this year – the opportunity for friendships to be forged amidst friendly competition is gone. Voldemort's influence at Durmstrang will increase; it is highly likely that many of his new followers will be coming from that school.

"Dark times are upon us all. The time for peace has passed. One thing that can be seen from his increasing bold moves – Voldemort is planning to come into the open before the next school year ends." This Dumbledore firmly believed in, not least because of Remus' report a week ago about the alliance between Greyback's clan and Voldemort. Which, all things considered, was well within

Dumbledore's expectations...but it was apparently not within the expectations of the other members, for when Dumbledore concluded his grave little speech, fearful, anxious, resolute eyes could be seen all around.

"Albus," Molly Weasley whispered faintly. "What do we do then?" Whatever we can, Molly, whatever we can, precious little though it might be. No matter the price. Dumbledore allowed his eyes to sweep across the room before answering, "We fight, Molly, we fight. We fight as we have always have, as we always will. We fight united against Voldemort and his forces."

After the seriousness of the previous chapter, this chapter is more light-hearted. It was meant to be a contrast between Harry's two sides: his mature side capable of killing and the child in him who still knows how to have fun. Chronologically, this chapter is set after the visit to the werewolves but before the first raid Harry led in the previous chapter.

For those of you eagerly anticipating the Triwizard Tournament to be held in Harry's fourth year, sorry to disappoint, but I've pushed it back to the fifth year...But I hope you all managed to enjoy this chapter about the Quidditch World Cup!

Ok, I have only two papers left, and after that I'd be free! So with that in mind, I shall continue my revision. Cheers!

Chapter Twenty-One: Durmstrang Year Four Part I

This year, the atmosphere in the cabin of the Durmstrang ship was both relaxed and formal at the same time. While the students were interacting easily with one another, one could see that the hierarchy of order within Harry's informer court of followers was adhered to; only Harry was seated on the centre bench, together with Daphne (who was considered out of the hierarchy system). The rest spread out over the other bench, sat on the floor or stood against the wall, holding quiet conversations amongst themselves.

"Did you enjoy the Quidditch World Cup, Harrison?" Daphne asked animatedly. Harry had kept in contact with her regularly throughout the summer, even though Daphne had been holidaying with her family the month before the World Cup, though he had been too busy with a mission after the World Cup to do so. Harry shrugged slightly. "You know I'm not as crazy over Quidditch as Draco. But I must admit, it was pretty exciting."

Daphne smiled coyly. "As was the...incident after the World Cup, wasn't it?" Harry tossed his friend an amused smile. "Definitely. Did you witness the chaos firsthand?" Making a face, Daphne shook her head mournfully. "Unfortunately, Daddy thought that we should not be around for such scenes – he made Mommy take Astoria and I home before the riots. I did read about it in the Daily Prophet though."

Harry smirked even as he waved his hand nonchalantly. "They were pretty accurate...this time." He did not add that this was probably because Uncle Stan, on his father's orders, had pulled a few strings to ensure that it was indeed so. Daphne eyed him and allowed a small knowing smile to blossom on her face. Harry then spent the time conversing with Daphne on some of the current affairs of the Wizarding World. He was rather surprised actually, at how shrewd she was to see beneath some of the puffs to the crux of the matter beneath...but then Daphne had always been intelligent, although she did not make a point of exhibiting that intelligence.

On a spur of the moment, he asked her to coordinate their network of informants in the school this year, freeing up his second-in-command, Aleron, whose job it had been previously, for other things. Daphne had been surprised but readily agreed. After all, she was already responsible for recruiting most of the informants. Daphne,

Harry had found, had a talent for getting others to underestimate her. People were always taken in by her beautiful and innocent doll-like features. Before they knew it, they had inadvertently managed to compromise themselves and some ways, and were blackmailed into doing her bidding (so subtly that they sometimes did not even recognize the fact that they were being blackmailed).

Very soon, they had arrived at Durmstrang. At the Great Hall, Harry exchanged greetings with all his other Group mates, aware that their numbers were, by now, nearing forty. If things kept up, his Group would soon be surpassing the Blood Ravens in numbers and not merely rankings. The latter Group had, in Harry's first year, drawn the majority of its members from the sixth and seventh years, as well as the talented fifth-years. This year however, one quarter of the sixth-years had been in Harry's Group since their third year, making a severe dent in their numbers.

Harry to force himself to pay attention as the Highmaster Karkaroff begun his usual start-of-the-year speech. He noted that the man looked slightly triumphant about something, and soon realized what it was when the man announced, "Please give your congratulations to our new Head Girl, Sidonie Orianna Blishwick and our new Head Boy, Harrison Maximus Riddle." Harry fought not to allow his jaws to slacken as he slowly stood up. Blishwick, a seventh-year distant cousin of Korbin and the current head of the Blood Ravens as of this year was an expected choice, but he had expected the Head Boy to be either the new leader of the Jade Talons, another seventh year, or in light of their recent drop in rankings, perhaps the second-in-command of the Blood Ravens. It was infrequent, but not rare, for both Head Boy and Girl to come from one Group, usually when their rival had so diminished their standing. It was much rarer, however, and practically unheard of, for a fourth-year like him to be made Head Boy. And since the position was given based on voting amongst the professors, it wasn't entirely due to Karkaroff's bootlicking that he got the position either.

As Harry bowed to the Great Hall, he was aware that his Group had erupted into extremely loud clapping, some of them offering their congratulations while others beamed widely. Even members of other Groups, most of them in sixth-year and below, clapped vigorously – obviously happy for him.

Well, this certainly changes things, thought Harry smugly. Stage five of the plan can be brought forward.

Still, his plans had to take a back seat for the time being. Harry spent the first few weeks concentrating on his academia. He informed his Professors in European History of Magic, Necromancy and Wards of his intention to sit for his OWLs in those subjects this year, one year ahead to schedule, as he felt that he was more than ready to tackle them at that level. Other than Necromancy, Harry had consistently gotten perfect scores in the other two subjects, so his professors had been delighted when Harry indicated his intentions. Unfortunately, Alexei had joined him in the fast-tracked Necromancy programme, much to Harry's concern.

"Have you come to a decision, Alexei, on the subject of pursuing Necromancy as a career?" Harry had questioned Alexei one night. The latter had sighed softly, and then replied flatly, "Since the World Cup, my parents have not looked at me even once. I am fully convinced that they do not see me as a part of their family. They would be no great loss should I choose to take this path." His eyes were emotionless even as he revealed his deepest sorrow to Harry.

"But my prince, you were right. I would miss the bond with our roommates, it is the only emotional attachment I have." Harry knew Alexei was not exaggerating; he had always been a loner and the only friendships he had been with the other three. Alexei met Harry's gaze as he continued, "However, there is something more, something yet stronger than familial or friendship bonds. The vow of loyalty I swore to you, my prince, surpasses any other claims on me, whether it be my future career or otherwise – I will abide by your unstated wishes. I will continue to pursue Necromancy, however I will not become a full Necromancer unless I have your leave to do so."

Harry blinked in surprise. Alexei was an independent and strong-willed person, he had not thought that he would surrender his choices in this matter to him. Not for the first time, Harry had to reconcile his mind to fully comprehend the extent of power he held over his followers' every choice. And, in turn, his responsibility to them as well.

"Very well, Alexei. Thank you for your trust in me." Harry replied sincerely as he inclined his head.

The next day, Harry spent the first Prefect Meeting jockeying for power with the Head Girl, who was slightly disgruntled that her counter-part was a fourteen year-old boy. Fortunately for Harry, his voice had completely broken into a smooth and rich baritone, even if he still looked like a young teenager. He found that as many people were misled by appearances, it was much easier if he did look mature and older, so he had dressed accordingly. It was also because of this tendency that Harry had given his old Prefect position to Silas instead of Emlen – while Silas would have to prove his worth to the other prefects, Emlen would have had it twice as hard because of his youth. Most Prefects present were fifth year and above.

Blishwick called for attention with two claps of her hands, starting the meeting. Harry allowed her to do so unchallenged, ignoring such petty exhibits of leadership. On the agenda that day was a petition by students pleading for the Prefects and the two Heads to advance their cause, so that they would be able to visit a relatively nearby village, Kaltes, during weekends. Kaltes was down the lake, requiring a fifteen minutes ship ride to reach – its inconvenience was one reason Durmstrang students were not allowed out of school grounds during the academic year, unlike at Hogwarts.

Harry sat back and listened to the arguments from all the Prefects as to whether it would be possible to get the Highmaster to approve the visits, and most importantly, whether it would be in their best interests to do so. The extra work the Prefects would no doubt have to do looking over the students at the village versus how it would endear them to the student population. The role of the Prefects. Their responsibilities. And so on.

For half an hour, Harry merely sat there and listened to their arguments, watching Blishwick argue voraciously against the adopting of the petitions' cause. Harry had already, from Daphne's network of informants, gauged the mood of the school – the petition needed to be passed, with or without the Head Girl's support. Once he felt that everyone had enough time to get their opinions out, he stood up.

Sidonie Blishwick felt a chill creep down her spine when her male counter-part stood up and got instant silence. She had been trying to maintain control for the pass half hour, and here he came and took it

away from her with a single gesture! It has to be his reputation, Sidonie decided irritably. The boy who defeated the previous Head Boy last year, the boy who can speak in Parseltongue, the boy who could control Fiendfyre at thirteen and so forth. In fact, rumours were already flying around that he was either somewhat related to the Dark Lord, or that he would become the next Dark Lord.

If his dueling skills and magical powers were his only strength, Sidonie would be able to deal with that. Unfortunately, she had to concede that the boy was adept at politics too. His subsequent speech placated both sides, both those for and against, and ended with a smooth, "As such, I will speak to our esteemed Highmaster about this. Should nothing come of it, we will simply drop the matter. Is this agreeable to everyone?"

A rhetorical question, Sidonie sniffed disgustedly as murmurs of agreement filled the room. The boy then turned to her with a small smirk on his face. "Is there anything else you'd like to add, Miss Blishwick?" Sidonie merely glared. There was nothing she could add and he knew it. Anything else would only make her seem like she was aiding the boy. She could not object either, as his suggestion was entirely reasonable.

"If there's nothing else, then I declare this meeting over. Have a good weekend, my friends." With another smirk, the boy disappeared with his two lackeys.

A couple of weeks later, Harry was regretting choosing Silas as his replacement. The idiot had challenged some seventh-year from Blood Ravens to a duel because the latter refused to stop hitting on Aleron. Challenging someone to a duel over something as stupid as that...and losing on top of it! Now the tension with the Blood Ravens had intensified further, and the last thing Harry wanted was an all-out war at this point of his Head Boy career. He had much subtler ways of forcing them into submission...Harry felt like hexing Silas to bloody pieces, but restrained himself to a severe tongue-lashing while Silas knelt on the cold stone floor in contrition at his feet.

"If I was my father, you'd be writhing under a Cruciatus now," Harry had informed the brown-haired teenager after a twenty minutes lecture. Silas flinched slightly, and then squared his shoulders. "I'm sorry. It was indeed very rash and foolish of me, my prince." Harry gauged the sincerity of the teenager kneeling at his feet with

narrowed eyes before snapping out, "See that it doesn't happen again." Then, he stalked off to his room.

One good thing came out of the incident. Harry had decided that should any of his Group mates decided to challenge others to duel in the future, they would not be losing. Hence, after easily obtaining permission from the Highmaster, he conducted dueling lessons for all his Group members who were in his year and above, about twenty of them. It started with teaching them how to use what they had learnt in class to duel effectively, however, it soon progressed to Harry teaching them some of the rarer Dark spells and curses.

When the news spread that Harry was teaching his Group members the Dark Arts, the rumours intensified and some started to refer to him privately as the Dark Prince...the Dark Prince of the Dark Court of the Night, as Harry's Group was formally known as.

"Do you mind?" Daphne had asked him curiously one day. "After all, you didn't like it when they all started calling you 'my prince'." Harry gave his friend a half-irritated, half-amused glare. "And who started it?" Giggling, Daphne merely gave him an innocent look. Harry shook his head and sighed, "No, I guess I'm used to it by now. What with my father being who he is...the title does fit. And it'd help move my plans along..."

Indeed, one side effect was that many from other Groups approached Harry with requests for Group transfers, even some seventh-years from the Blood Ravens. The Durmstrang students were hungry to learn that kind of magic, especially after Silas asked for a rematch with the seventh-year, and won easily after merely one month of lessons. However, Harry only took the best of every year – namely the most talented six or seven students in that year.

By December, the Night Serpents had almost fifty members.

Harry was elated. His plans were on track...soon, the Blood Ravens would lose their position as unrivaled top dog. He even grinned when Steffi Stockmann offered sincere congratulations to him one night in the common room, her vixen-like eyes sparkling in a manner that caused Harry's heart to give a small thump...

Afterwards, Harry pondered on the implications of that tell-tale heart-beat. He was not an innocent – far from it. What with all the tales

that his Death Eater uncles sometime liked to tell of their youthful exploits, Harry thought himself very well taught on such matters. He had however, no practical experience though. And now that his body was undergoing puberty, well, perhaps it was time to get some.

And sixteen year-old Steffi Stockmann was as good a place to start as any, since he appeared to be attracted to her. She was pretty enough in a foxy way, with her short red-haired bob, upwardly-slanted vixen-like eyes, honey-coloured skin and a devilishly hot, curvaceous body...and Harry knew she had had many boyfriends before, even if she currently had none now, so it wasn't like Harry would be corrupting an innocent...

If anything, Harry was the one being corrupted, he thought amusedly two weeks later. Harry had spent a couple of days flirting with Steffi, practicing his technique, learnt from watching how Aleron had acted around Silas last year. Steffi had been slightly stunned at first, surprised that her Group leader was acting flirtatious with her, before reciprocating with passion. Harry supposed that she found him attractive because of his power, for he knew his still-developing body couldn't be that impressive to a sixth-year like her. He thought she knew that he was merely making use of her, nevertheless, she seemed willing enough and Harry was quick to take advantage – they had progressed to kissing on the third day and that was what Harry was currently doing.

Licking her lips delicately, Harry parted her lips with his tongue before plundering her mouth passionately – Steffi had taught him some kissing techniques after his first sloppy and inexperienced kiss. After a couple of minutes, they broke apart. Seeing Steffi gasping with a flushed face, Harry smirked, "How was that?"

Steffi licked her lips coyly, winking at him. "Very delicious, my prince. Feed me more?" Harry shook his head regretfully. "Unfortunately, I have a Prefect meeting to attend in a few minutes. And yes, there they are..." He brought down the privacy wards only to see Aleron and Silas waiting a respectful distance away. Harry was not worried as to how long they had been standing there, for the privacy ward he had cast had ensured that no one would be able to see anything but a blur, nor hear anything but a slight buzzing.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning Steffi." Harry petted his pouting...girlfriend, at least technically, on the head before heading towards the two Prefects.

"That's an impressive conquest, my prince." Aleron murmured softly. "Steffi only goes for the best. She was with Vicktor Krum a couple of months ago, and before that, she was with the previous Jade Talons Group Leader..." Harry laughed at that. "Luckily for her, I have a liberal policy concerning fraternizing with other Groups' members..." Casting a side-long glance at his second-in-command, he noticed a hint of worry in the latter's eyes, worry that he knew was for him.

"I appreciate your concern, Aleron, but you don't need to worry. I have no intention of having my heart broken by that girl, even if she did do that to Krum. Our arrangement is entirely mutually beneficial." He watched as Aleron visibly relaxed, even as he smiled ruefully. "I should've known...you're not the kind to be lured in by a pretty face, Young Master. And I know I have no right to interfere in your private life, especially as you've been so generous with our relationship..." Here, he glanced at his partner involuntarily, well aware that it would have been within Harry's rights to put his controversial gay relationship to a halt, but he soon continued, "But I couldn't help it..."

Harry cut his off with an abrupt wave of his hand. "You're my friend too, Aleron. You may voice your concerns at anytime. But, once I've addressed it, I expect you to accept my decision and to keep all future opinions on the subject matter to yourself. That goes for you too, Silas. Is that understood?"

The two sixth-year Prefects exchanged glances, then bowed in acknowledgement. "Yes, Young Master." Harry nodded, satisfied. He would not tolerate anyone objecting to his arrangement with Steffi. Her reputation as a girl drawn to power only served to increase his status, while her sinfully hot body hinted at his own physical maturity. Of course, she was also teaching him all sorts of things about the art of lust, as well as courtship. The only down side, as far as he could tell, was that Daphne seemed to disapprove. Although she did not voice her opinions, she had been rather aloof since Harry started kissing Steffi – he put it down to jealousy, as she had been the only female friend that Harry was close to.

Late that night, Daphne Persephone Greengrass stood at the window of the dormitory room which she shared with some of her

yearmates. Disillusioned and with a privacy charm cast, Daphne allowed her eyes to take in the vista of the light cast upon the shimmering lake by the waning moon and the twinkling stars in the night sky, even as she settled down to do some thinking.

For the past two weeks, Harrison had been constantly in the company of one Steffi Stockmann, the voluptuous sixth-year student who went around the castle breaking hearts. While Daphne liked Steffi well enough, somehow, when it came to accepting the fact that Harrison was with the girl, she felt the irrational urge to hex something. And that was saying something, for Daphne was not the most emotional of persons by nature.

Daphne suppressed a mental sigh. She had always had a bit of a minor crush on Harrison. After all, the boy was charismatic, powerful, intelligent and good-looking. What she had not suspected however, was that her feelings appeared to run deeper than that. Were it a mere crush, Daphne was sure that she would have gotten over her jealousy easily. She was, after all, not inexperienced on the dating scene in Durmstrang, although she had never had a steady relationship. Now, it seemed that Harrison had finally discovered his interest in the opposite sex. And it had taken that fact for Daphne to discover her interest in Harrison.

So where did she stand now? Daphne knew that eventually, she wanted a chance at a relationship with Harrison. But not now. Not when he was still new to girls, easily mesmerized by the first pretty face and hot body that he saw. Daphne sighed. That was perhaps a little uncharitable, but Merlin knew she wasn't feeling very charitable at the moment. Nevertheless, Daphne had patience in abundance. It was what made her good at sniffing out valuable information from her informants and the school's rumour mill after all. She could wait for her chance with Harrison.

And in the meantime, Daphne would follow her mother's advice; it was time to grow up. Daphne's mother had suspected that on most days, Harrison saw her as something like a little sister. He was protective towards her, had a soft spot for her, yet did not treat her as an equal, and as such, was unlikely to have romantic feelings for her. Mother's words does make sense...If Daphne wanted to eventually gain his attention, she would have to show that she was his equal. Heading the information network in Durmstrang was merely a start. No matter. Daphne had inherited foresight and

pragmatism from her father, a man who, in hopes of a future relationship between the dark heir and his elder daughter, had sent said daughter to Durmstrang instead of his alma mater Hogwarts. She would put it to good use.

Harry spent the rest of the time before Christmas holidays doing three things, one of which was slowly exposing those of his Group who did not yet know of his status as the dark heir to the Dark Lord's plans and ideals, dropping hints of the Dark Lord's return. The very smart ones or those with parental connections had long since suspected or known of the fact and were quite receptive – Harry thought that all the fourth, fifth and sixth years that were not already in the know would be ready for recruitment right after Christmas, in line with his father's plans. For the younger ones, Harry planned to let the seeds of loyalty he had planted grow. After all, the fourth-years and above had been under his influence for at least four years – the younger ones as yet needed to be more strongly influenced before they could be captured.

Other than that, Harry also spent time speeding through his fourth-year material in Necromancy, Wards and European History of Magic. He intended to complete his fourth-year coursework by the end of December, so that he could start on his fifth. The subject of wards was extremely easy for him, given his rare talent, and European History of Magic involved merely a memorization of facts and forming valid conclusions on them, nothing difficult for Harry. It was only for Necromancy that Harry had to put in more effort – he still found the summoning of zombies rather taxing. As such, he was only able to summon and control one at a time, while OWL level Necromancy required the simultaneous summoning of three. At this rate, he'd never be able to summon an Inferius, which was an even higher-level of zombie, since they were quite sentient. And that, after all, was his only goal for learning Necromancy – to be able to help his father with his army of Inferi during the coming war. At least I'd have Alexei for that...he mused thoughtfully. Alexei was already able to summon a couple of Inferi at the same time, though he was far from Voldemort's level.

The last thing that Harry focused on was to get his Quidditch team ready for the upcoming Quidditch matches. By now, the Night Serpents' Quidditch team was the best in Durmstrang, despite the Maroon Wings' possession of international Quidditch star player Viktor Krum. While the latter had one exceptional player, Harry's

team consisted of seven excellent ones. In the end, while Harry had not managed to get the Snitch before the talented seeker, his team still won merely because their score was more than a hundred and fifty points ahead of the other team when Krum had caught the Snitch – a situation which Harry had forced Krum into, for if the latter had not caught the Snitch then, Harry would have done so. Still, what mattered was that the Night Serpents had still won the five hundred points that were at stake.

All these events served to put Harry in quite a good mood. The cherry of the cake was when Karkaroff had stood up during breakfast one morning, and had announced that he had approved the petition. "It has brought to my attention that the student population has recently submitted a petition for weekend visits to the village of Kaltes. As your Head Boy, Mr. Riddle, has argued so persuasively in favour of this petition, I find it difficult to withhold my permission. Therefore, I hereby allow all students who are able to get permission forms signed by their parents or guardians over the holidays to visit Kaltes whenever a trip is granted." Cheers erupted in the Great Hall, and chants of "Dark Prince! Dark Prince!" could be heard through the furor. Harry's smirk was wide when he caught sight of a furious Blishwick, no doubt worried by Harry's popularity, seated two tables away.

By the time the Christmas holidays rolled around, Harry was in an extremely cheerful mood, despite Daphne's recent aloofness towards him. Her work with the network of informants was exemplary as usual, but she had begun giving him the cold shoulder over small things. Where before she would sit beside him, or at least near him, at breakfast, she now sat with the rest of her female friends several seats away. And even though they conversed as frequently as before, there was now a distant chill in her manner – she maintained a mask over her emotions, a mask that she never before put on when alone with Harry, a mask that she only ever wore with acquaintances – those outside their Group. She was never emotionless, no, not Daphne, but the light words, sweet smiles and lilting laughter she gave lacked sincerity.

No matter. She would come around eventually, Harry thought amusedly, when she realized that he was merely using Steffi. Perhaps he would send her an extra-nice gift this Christmas, to make up for the perceived slight.

Yes, I've finally started slipping in some relationship stuff. Thank you for all your suggestions, as of now, Harry will be paired with Daphne. I reserve the right to change my mind should the pairing not work out though. Be warned: this will be a very slow-developing relationship, that will span many, many chapters, but only touched upon lightly. In other words, I will not go in-depth into it, because I have no wish to turn the story into a romance (which I do not know how to write about anyway).

Chapter Twenty-Two: Christmas

That Christmas was the worst Christmas of Harry's life. Well, when one did not count the Christmases spent with the Dursleys, he supposed. Nothing could top that on his 'worst Christmas' list.

It was the Christmas of the Dark Lord's return, a return that had been planned most meticulously. The third day of the Christmas holidays, the Dark Lord himself led a large group of Death Eaters to Azkaban, to break out all of his followers who were as yet incarcerated in that hellhole. Since the Dark Lord's second rise, he had stealthily worked towards freeing as many of his followers via political means. That night however, was when he freed all the rest...

While that was the main show of the night, the Dark Lord had also sent Lucius and Harry on two separate missions. The former had been sent to lead a raid against Tiberius Ogden, a Wizengamot member who was still a staunch supporter of Dumbledore, while Harry, together with Bellatrix, were to lead six other Death Eaters on an attack against Emmeline Vance, a talented member of the Order of the Phoenix. "I want all of them dead, my friends. No one is to survive." Voldemort had hissed coldly, at a Death Eater meeting. Harry had been present in his silver mask and had accepted his orders with alacrity.

This was the second raid that Harry had led. Brimming with confidence and suppressed excitement, Harry had made quick work of the wards, bringing them down easily enough. Later, Harry would realize that it was perhaps slightly too easy...

At that time however, Harry had merely sent Bellatrix with half of his forces to the back, while he burst in through the front doors, after taking the time to unravel the wards on that door easily enough, before casting a strong anti-apparation ward, complete with runes, at the house. Emmeline Vance was a spinster who lived with her two brothers and their wives in the huge family house. All were talented wizards and witches, with Vance being the most powerful of the lot, Harry saw from their auras. Harry had given a feral smirk, ordered the Death Eaters with him to corner the others, before launching into an attack at the Order member.

Their duel had been quick and furious. The intensity of their battle would have stunned the other Death Eaters, had they actually had the time to watch. Harry dodged and cast spells quickly, often using the first spell that came to the top of his mind. Vance was very good; Harry had almost no time at all to think between his moves. Both were equally quick on their feet, while Vance had the advantage of experience, and Harry, a wide repertoire of rare and Dark offensive spells.

Soon enough, Harry was caught up in the exhilaration of the battle – battle lust – as he so often was. His world narrowed down to his immediate surroundings and the opponent in front of him. Every faculty that he had at his disposal was focused on her defeat. As their dance grew deadlier and more intricate, the smirk on Harry's face blossomed into a ferocious snarl.

Back and forth they went, in moves that looked like they were choreographed into a complex dance. Then suddenly, Vance made her fatal mistake – she cast multiple spells towards him, then tried to steer the fight away from one of her sisters, who was perilously close. Unfortunately for her, while she was distracted, Harry, instead of putting up a shield, had dived forward beneath the spells she cast and aimed the Killing Curse at her. Vance was killed instantly.

Harry stood up and brushed himself off coolly, taking stock of the situation. Vance lay dead at his feet, as was one couple, who looked like they had died fighting back to back. All of the Death Eaters were now congregating around the remaining couple...Then, suddenly, there was chaos. Men and women burst into the house from all directions, wearing khaki trenchcoats with upturned collars – Aurors.

If he had time to spare, Harry would be cursing loudly – his look-out charms had failed, probably disabled by the Aurors. But how had they known? Leaving the analysis for a later time, Harry shouted to Bellatrix, "Aunt Bella, finish them off, I'll hold off the Aurors!"

As he spoke, Harry had already ran to the door and drew some of the Aurors outside – four of them, while the other three had turned to the Death Eater nearest Harry. Thereafter, it was a grim affair as Harry struggled to hold off four fully-trained Aurors – a dark-skinned man with a large gold ring through his ear, a tall, rugged-looking man with pale eyes, and two female brunettes, who appeared to be related, so similar in appearance they were.

Harry soon decided that the dark-skinned man was the greatest threat. He had a brilliant sapphire coloured aura that blazed at about the same size as Bellatrix's. Even one-on-one, Harry knew that they'd be a match. At four-on-one...hence Harry used all the tricks available at his disposal, all the Dark spells, curses and hexes that he could think of, in the most ingenious ways possible – he often combined them with hastily drawn runes to increase their effects.

"Give it up, you can't defeat us." The dark-skinned man's voice was loud and commanding as he shouted to Harry. Harry did not bother to reply, he dodged, shielded, then snapped off a round of spells silently in quick succession, managing to hurt one of the woman and the tall man with a much-milder version of Fiendfyre, though it took a lot of his power to do so.

At that moment, Harry heard a loud feminine scream behind him. As the only female Death Eater at the scene was his Aunt Bella, who wouldn't be caught dead screaming, Harry thought that it was safe to assume that it had been her victim. Apparently, the dark-skinned man thought so too, for he somehow managed to get past Harry while he was distracted by the barrage of spells from the other three Aurors.

Harry was furious and worried. Would Aunt Bella be able to handle the man? He knew she was the only one handling the couple's death – most of the others were out in the garden with him, having drawn out the Aurors, while another should be securing their escape route at the back door. In a split second, he made up his mind. Leaving himself open to attack, he quickly drew the rune for 'control' in the air. Not quickly enough however, for a cutting hex cast by one of the woman scored a direct hit against his chest. Ignoring the fiery pain spiraling out from the wound, Harry utilized his Occlumency skills to ensure that he would be able to concentrate on his spell. Pointing the wand in at his opponents, Harry visualized, concentrated and shouted, "Fiendfyre accersitus!"

A spiralling torrent of black flames shot out from his wand at the Aurors, taking the forms of huge, towering snakes, who soon wrapped themselves around his three opponents, even as they tried their best to evade the cursed fire. As Harry struggled to control the cursed fire, beads of sweat formed on his brows, even as he felt much of his magical powers getting drained to support the spell. Out

of the corner of his eye, Harry saw the dark-skinned man rushing out of the house with a limp woman in his hands, presumably the rescued victim. Horror filled the dark-skinned man's eyes at the sight of his three companions all burning in the throes of the fire, their screams filling the air.

But the man was a professional – instead of trying to help his colleagues, he took one look at the severely injured woman in his arms and rushed off towards the boundaries of the anti-Apparation wards. I want all of them dead, his father's words echoed in his mind. But there was nothing Harry could do – all the other Death Eaters were tied up with their own Auror opponents, even though some did attempt to get to the dark-skinned man. Anger and helplessness filled Harry as he watched the dark-skinned Auror disappear just beyond the Gates with a loud 'pop'.

With a wave of his hand, Harry cast a wandless sonorous spell on himself even as he maintained a tight grip of his control on the Fiendfyre. "Our work tonight is done! Morsmordre." Letting loose of his control over the Fiendfyre, Harry cast the Dark Mark into the sky even as he released the anti-apparition wards that he had set up over the compound with his magical signature. All around him, Death Eaters started to apparate out even as the loose Fiendfyre started to spread.

The last thing Harry saw before he apparated out was the panicked expressions on the faces of the remaining Aurors as they realized what he had let loose upon the grounds.

"She's still in intensive care at St. Mungo's, Sirius," Kingsley Shacklebolt said heavily as he gave his report to his boss and friend, one day after the attack. "When I left with the victim, she was already hanging on to life by a bare thread...her husband had been killed just minutes ago by Bellatrix Lestrange I think, it was probably why she screamed so loudly. Lestrange must have taken that opportunity to attack her...no one that seriously injured could scream that loudly..."

"Five Aurors dead, three seriously injured. How many of them were there, Kingsley?" Sirius asked hollowly, his eyes shadowed with pain. The dark-skinned man shook his head. "Bellatrix Lestrange was the only one I recognized...her cackling...there were at least five

others...and the one in the silver mask." Sirius eyes narrowed at that odd fact. "Silver?"

Kingsley nodded wearily. "Yes. He was very good, Sirius. Managed to hold off Dawlish, the Bagman sisters and myself for a while, before I gave him the slip. Well-versed in the Dark Arts too. He was the one who cast the Fiendfyre curse that burnt down the entire garden and half the house...he was able to control it, Sirius. When I hurried past with the victim, he had the Fiendfyre coiled around Dawlish and the Bagman sisters – they were already burning to cinders...too far gone. There was no way to save them..."

Sirius frowned at that. Both Aurors knew that while it did not take much to summon Fiendfyre, save a certain amount of experience with the Dark Arts, it was quite another thing entirely to control it. In their long careers of fighting Dark wizards, Sirius doubted that there was more than a handful that had successfully used the curse against him. Of course, he always managed to dodge it...but Dawlish and the Bagman sisters had not been so lucky. "He only released it at the end, I think, because it provided an opening for them to apparate away..." Kingsley had continued neutrally – both men had seen too much deaths to become hardened enough to deal with the situation objectively.

"Maybe it was a high-ranking Death Eater? But no...their masks are always white, no matter their rank..." Both men sat pondering on this new development. At length, Kingsley sighed. "We'd just have to wait and observe...perhaps inform Dumbledore?"

"No!" Sirius snapped quickly, his eyes flashing with annoyance. "I mean, it's an ongoing investigation, Kingsley. We'll keep it within the Department for now...when there're concrete results, then we inform him..." Kingsley held Sirius' gaze for a moment before nodding. While not convinced of Sirius' reasoning, he would do as his boss ordered for the time being...

"Now we'll just have to deal with the impact of his public return..." Sirius remarked sourly after some time, casting a glance at the newspaper lying on his desk. "What a disastrous Christmas!"

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named Returns

Mass Breakout at Azkaban

In a brief statement last night, Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge confirmed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named has returned to this country and is active once more. "It is with great regret that I must confirm that the wizard styling himself Lord - well, you know who I mean - is alive and among us again," said Fudge, looking tired and flustered as he addressed reporters.

The Ministry of Magic has confirmed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named announced his return on the night of the 20th December with a personally-led attack on Azkaban. Subsequently, a mass breakout of all high-security prisoners, mostly former Death Eaters, occurred. "It is with almost equal regret that we report the mass revolt of the Dementors of Azkaban, who have shown themselves averse to continuing in the Ministry's employ. We believe that the dementors are currently taking direction from Lord - Thingy. We urge the magical population to remain vigilant. The Ministry is currently publishing guides to elementary home and personal defence that will be delivered free to all wizarding homes within the coming month." Fudge said.

On the same night, the family homes of Ogden and Vance were attacked, led by two separate groups of Death Eaters. For more information about the attack, turn to page four.

Harry returned to the Manor that night severely exhausted and weak from blood loss. Voldemort, who had returned earlier, took one look at Harry and had ordered his best healer to tend to his son. It was only the next morning, after Harry's wound had been healed as best as it could be, that Voldemort had summoned Harry to his study.

'Explain.' The Dark Lord hissed in Parseltongue as he eyed his son coldly. Harry lowered his gaze in shame as he felt the censure spear him like an icy shaft. Slowly, he lowered himself to his knees. He had failed his father...no, his lord. He had failed to exterminate the all the members of the Vance family.

Steeling himself, Harry raised his head to meet the Dark Lord's gaze. He was not a coward; he would accept all the censure that he was due. Harry described how he had taken down the wards before continuing, "The first part of the mission went perfectly well, however, halfway through the mission, Aurors appeared. I had been...careless," Harry admitted. He could see that now. How his

impatience had led to his rash actions...Fool! He should have suspected a trick when the wards had been torn down so easily. He took a deep breath, continuing as calmly as he could, "with the wards. I believe there was some sort of warning system embedded, which I did not detect..."

"Crucio." Voldemort hissed in displeasure, his gleaming snake-like, red eyes narrowed in anger. Harry collapsed onto the floor gasping as his body writhed in agony from the waves upon waves of fire consuming his body. He was burning, burning in flaming excruciating pain, but he tried his best to grit his teeth and accept his deserved punishment. After ten seconds, his father released the curse with a flick of his wand. "Continue."

Harry suppressed a slight shiver as he pulled himself back into a kneeling position. It appeared that his father was going to drag this out over many rounds of the Cruciatus. Harry had seen this punishment used before and he knew the effects – the torture would be amplified by the contrasting pain-free breaks in between – but he could not deny that it was well-deserved. After all, he was the one who had partially ruined his father's carefully planned return. Thankfully, the main objective of the raid – to destroy Vance to serve as an example of those who opposed the Dark Lord, had been carried out. Or Harry would feel even more wretched than he was currently feeling.

"Yes, my lord." Harry managed to say. Somehow, the honorific seemed appropriate in this situation, for Harry knew his father was not castigating him in his role as a father but as his lord. "I ordered Aunt Bella and the other two Death Eaters to finish up the couple while I held off the Aurors. I battled with three Aurors, however, the fourth managed to get past me. He rescued the woman – Vance's younger sister-in-law..." Harry's voice was cut off as he was once again hit with the Cruciatus curse. The pain he felt this time was twice as intense as before; Harry knew his father was extremely displeased with his incompetence. Harry bit his lips and endured as silently as he could. Although Harry had been trained to break out of the Cruciatus curse, he knew he would never use it when it was his father who put him under the Curse; for one, he knew he more than deserved it on those occasions. Unlike with the Death Eaters, his father rarely used the curse on him unless Harry had committed a severe mistake. But allowing himself to get hurt and the woman to

be rescued fell under the category of a serious mistake in his father's opinion. And Harry agreed with his father.

When the Dark Lord finally released the curse, it took all of Harry's strength for him to rise to his knees again. Taking a trembling breath, he waited for his father's signal. At the wave of his father's hand, he continued in a faltering voice, trying his best to control the after-effects of the Cruciatus curse. "He hexed me...i did not..react in time...he brought the...woman past the wards...apparated...I was held up by the other three...did not manage to trace..." Harry took another deep breath, before continuing in a slightly stronger voice. "I was in charge, yet I was careless; I did not tie up the mission successfully. And...my carelessness resulted in my injury." Harry braced himself before meeting his father's brilliant crimson eyes with some difficulty, unwilling to hide from the censure that was his due. "For those two mistakes I apologize. I now submit myself for whatever punishment you deem fit to mete out, my lord."

The Dark Lord struggled to hide the smile that threatened to break out at his heir's words. True, he was angry at his son's failure, disappointed even, but the boy was so earnest, so sincere, had such pure motives so different from his Death Eaters that Voldemort was touched. Nevertheless, this would not deter the Dark Lord from punishing the boy, for the Dark Lord showed no mercy, even if he was his precious heir.

"Two minutes." The Dark Lord's voice was rather cool as he pronounced the punishment, with none of the usual sadistic glee that characterized his interactions with the Death Eaters and Muggles. Harry nodded and bit his lips. Two minutes did not sound like very long, true, but when every second was one of pure, intense gut-wrenching agony, one hundred and twenty consecutive seconds of it was absolute torture.

"Crucio." The red light was the last thing Harry was aware of before he descended once more into unspeakable pain.

When Harry finally surfaced from the pain, he noted dimly that his father was gazing at him with an odd expression on his snake-like visage. It was so out-of-place on the Dark Lord's face that it took Harry a few seconds before he was able to place it. It was...concern...realization dawned on Harry. Harry was touched. He knew that his father had never cared for any other person before.

"Don't get used to it." The Dark Lord hissed. Harry could not help but smile a little at that. In his current state, his Occlumency shields were down, so his father could basically read every thought that he had. After a few moments of lying on the ground trembling, Harry managed to pull himself back to his knees.

The boy was strong, Voldemort mused. No begging, pleading or cries for forgiveness had issued from his mouth. Just an apology and an offer to take his punishment. Voldemort could not help but feel a tendril of satisfaction in the fact that he had trained his heir well. Unlike some of his Death Eaters who were snivelling cowards...Unfortunately, seeing his heir in pain, and by his own hands, somehow did not elicit the same feeling of enjoyment that it usually did with everyone else. Voldemort regretfully concurred with the boy's thoughts; he had come to care for Harry. Still, Voldemort was determined that this would not cause him to become soft.

"Enough. You are to remain in your room for three days. Meals will be brought to you." Harry heaved an internal sigh at that. He hated room arrest almost as much as the cruciatus, mainly because he got bored so easily. Still, he was well aware that he fully deserved the punishment, so all he said before complying with his father's orders however, was a respectful "Yes, father." Pushing himself to his feet with much difficulty, Harry stumbled out of his father's study.

Resting in his room, a knock on his door jarred Harry from dark contemplation of all the mistakes he had made the previous night. "Come in," he called, wondering who it could be. He smiled slightly when he saw that it was Barty. "Ah, Barty. I wasn't aware that I was allowed visitors."

Bartemius Crouch, Jr. returned Harry's smile ruefully. "I suspect not, Young Master. But I wanted to give this to you. It'd help with the after-effects of the Cruciatus." He handed Harry a small vial of crimson liquid. Harry raised an eyebrow. "Remember what happened last time? When father found out you snuck in to give me the Cruciatus-pain-relieving potion?" Barty flinched slightly, then smiled dryly. "I was hoping you'd convince Master not to punish me for this."

Laughing, Harry took the potion from Barty. "Don't worry, he didn't forbid me from taking any potions this time. Anyway...how's Aunt

Bella? Did Father punish her?" He could not help but allow a hint of his worry to leak through.

Barty shook his head slightly. "She's alright, Young Master. Master was quite lenient. He crucioed her couple of times when he found out that you were injured, but he did not punish her for the failure. He said...he said that it was your fault." The last was said softly.

A look of relief crossed Harry's expression. He was glad that no one had to suffer for his mistakes. "Yes it was. I was in charge." Harry stated, before changing the subject. "So. Tell me about how the break-out went."

Christmas eve. The Dark Lord did not believe in Christmas trees or Christmas decorations, so the exchange of presents between Harry and the other Death Eaters was usually done at Malfoy's Manor while Harry left his father's present on the desk in his father's study. This year, when he came to do the same, he found that his father was still awake.

"Father." Harry greeted politely. Voldemort set aside his work and beckoned for his son to enter. "Here's your present, but you aren't allowed to open it till morning," said Harry cheekily, as he laid the nicely wrapped present by the side of his father's desk.

Voldemort raised a non-existent eyebrow. "I'm always surprised at how you can be so cheeky even after punishment." Harry shrugged as he perched on the edge of his father's desk, smirking slightly. "I'm your son. You may practise all that 'do not forgive or forget' stuff with the others, but you'll always forgive me after you punish me."

Voldemort shook his head in slight exasperation. "Impudent brat. Maybe I was too lenient on you." Harry's eyes widened almost comically, even as he stiffened indignantly. Just when Voldemort thought his son was going to come back with another smart-ass comment however, Harry deflated, met his father's eyes and replied softly, "Maybe you were."

After a moment of stunned silence at that uncharacteristic comment, Voldemort used Legilimency on his heir to figure out what the boy was thinking. At the slightest brush from his father's mind, the boy lowered his Occlumency shields immediately, allowing Voldemort

access. Guilt, disappointment at his own actions and self-castigation – that was what Voldemort found.

Sighing slightly to himself, Voldemort contemplated upon how to deal with the situation. At length, he leaned forward slightly. "Listen to me, Harry. Do you know what would have happened had you been anyone else's son? You would have been coddled and fussed over for coming back with a wound. You would have been told how brave you were, to be able to hold off three Aurors at once at such a tender age. But you're not anyone's son, Harry, you're mine. My son. And I expect nothing less than perfection."

The intensity in his father's crimson eyes touched Harry – he understood that his father was trying to offer what comfort he could. He also knew what his father was trying to say. It had never before occurred to him that his father asked far more of him than any ordinary father asked of his sons. By anyone else's standard, his performance would have been considered good, even great. But not by his father, the Dark Lord's standards, for the man expected him to be perfect. And Harry could understand that. He was, after all, the son and heir of the Dark Lord.

"I am sorry to have disappointed you, Father. I promise to do better." Harry whispered determinedly, even as his guilt eased somewhat.

"I am sure you will, Harry. You are, after all, my son and heir." The Dark Lord replied with perfect confidence and a little amusement. "Now, shall I see what you've managed to scrounge up this year?" Voldemort reached for the stylish, black wrapping paper of the present with his slender fingers.

With his Seeker reflexes, Harry hid the present behind his back and mock-scowled. "You're supposed to open it only on Christmas Day, Father."

Voldemort smirked at his son. "The clock has struck twelve, it is technically the 25th of December, my son." He cast a wandless summoning spell, making the present fly into his upturned hand.

"Evil," Harry huffed and muttered under his breath, even as Voldemort looked at him pointedly, with an arched hairless eyebrow. "What was that again?"

Not wishing to be at the receiving end of a stinging hex, Harry sighed and relented. "Nothing, Father. Merry Christmas." As his father rather carefully unwrapped his present manually, Harry thought that somehow, somewhat, this Christmas was not turning out too bad after all.

Well, that was a short break from school stuff, next chapter, Harry returns to Durmstrang.

Chapter Twenty Three: Durmstrang Year Four Part II

After New Year's Day, Harry returned to Durmstrang with renewed determination to prove himself to his father. He threw himself into his studies, especially in European History of Magic, Wards and Necromancy, as he would be sitting for his OWLs in them at the end of the year. I will get nothing below an Outstanding, Harry vowed to himself.

As a result of his preoccupation with his schoolwork and private studies, his conducting of dueling lessons for his Group members and his leadership position in the Night Serpents, Harry had little time for other activities. Even so, he started learning Legilimency secretly, in an attempt to master the art which was rumoured to require great strength of the mind. The flip side of Occlumency, Legilimency was one of the most difficult subjects that Harry had encountered. Determined however, to prove that he was worthy of being heir to the Dark Lord to himself if no one else, Harry persevered.

But this also meant that Harry had less time to spend with his friends, followers and...girlfriend. So it came of no surprise to him when he noticed that Steffi showed signs of disgruntlement, which immediately prompted him to break up with her, just as February approached.

"Steffi dear," Harry petted the girl's hair one evening, when the common room was deserted. "It has been a fun couple of months, but I'm going to stop seeing you." Gently, he disengaged himself from the older teenager, who had been wrapped around him.

Raising her eyes to his emerald green ones, Steffi accepted his reasons gracefully enough, gave him a salacious wink, told him that she had had fun too, and departed to find other boys...or men with more time to spare her. Harry had graced her departure with a small smile and a mental sigh of relief. Having learned all there was to kissing and er, other things, that Steffi had to teach, Harry had found himself tiring of her soon after.

The break-up came at an opportune time too, for Daphne had been rather cool towards him since he started relationship with Steffi, and only after the break-up did she warm up to Harry again. Amused by her antics, Harry had pulled her aside one day.

"Daphne, my friend," Harry begun, his emerald green eyes sparkling with sincerity and charm. "You do know that I am not serious about Steffi, right? Never have been, never will be, and probably not with all the other girls that comes after her too." Blushing slightly from the intensity in Harry's eyes, Daphne tilted her head. Her eyes slightly stormy, she asked challengingly, "Why then Harrison? Why were you with her? And from the sound of it, you plan to date many others...why?" Her words were delivered in a cool, icy tone, signaling that Daphne was indeed angry about this situation.

Cocking his head slightly, Harry allowed a smirk to cross his lips. "Because, my dear Daphne, this," he indicated his face with a small gesture, "can be a very powerful tool, if used properly. And with practice comes perfection." His eyes softened slightly as he met her gaze again. "None of them though, will mean anything to me."

"And why should I care about this?" Daphne asked, though her tone was anything but angry, and a small blush coloured her cheeks. Why indeed? Harry smirked, as it was pretty clear that Daphne cared, and rather a lot, about it. He was content however, to leave the reasons behind it untouched for now.

"Because you're my friend and thus concerned about me?" Harry suggested lightly, laughter evident in his voice. Daphne pouted prettily, and then allowed a small peal of tinkling laughter to escape from her lips. And all was well between them once more.

During the last week of January, Durmstrang had their first trip to the village of Kaltes, a small wizarding village that was as famous as Hogsmeade in Britain. Durmstrang students living in the country often met up there during their holidays.

As Head Boy, Harry had to organize his Prefects to chaperon the trip, the logistics of which gave him a slight headache. In the end, he passed off the entire task to Aleron, and concentrated on being his most charming, especially when other students called out words of thanks to Harry for making the trip possible. It was yet another image that Harry wished to cultivate; that he was capable of doing the impossible. After all, the students had been lobbying for this for years, to no avail. Yet one word from Harry and...voila! The Highmaster had immediately granted his permission. It was no wonder that Harry had achieved his goal of getting the student

population to be in awe of him. He was, to all intents, truly their Dark Prince.

Disembarking from the magical Durmstrang ship that had brought the students to the village from the castle via sailing through the lake, Harry wrapped his cloak tighter about himself as the chilly air of the January wind hit him. "The ship will set sail no later than half past five. Students not on time will be left to make their own way back to the castle." Harry announced to the student population with a small smirk, before setting them loose on the unsuspecting Kaltes.

Ambling along leisurely with his friends Emlen, Francis and Daphne, who had brought two of her girlfriends along, Harry took in the shops of Kaltes with an appraising air. From the local pub to the jokes shop to the theater, Kaltes consisted of many of the usual entertainment that students were interested in. Here and there though, a few interesting shops caught Harry's eye. There was the Monster Shop of Monsters, which entrance looked to be sentient, the Butterfly's Dream, a rather shady looking shop with smoky windows and glitzy curtains, Pine's - Purveyor of Rare Magical Items since 1888, which Harry thought would be a good place to shop for presents to give to his extended family...Aunt Bella's birthday was coming up pretty soon after all...

But no, none of them would be appropriate for him to visit now, especially not with Daphne's two friends tagging along...both were his year-mates, the prettier of the two was from the Lavender Girls, Ann Russwurm, cousin of one of his Group member, a fifth-year Rune Russwurm, while the other was one Amelia Bottlewick, from a newly formed Sapphire Roses. Harry had been rather surprised to see the latter with Daphne, since she had been one of those in Brutus Flint's gang who had opposed him in his first and second year. But it seemed that after Flint's Group had been dissolved, she had distanced herself from him.

A clever move, though it shows her lack of loyalty...Harry kept an eye on Amelia Bottlewick throughout the day, even as their little group visited all the shops in the village. First they visited the bookshop (where Harry lingered), then the jokes-shop (at the insistence of Francis), the beauty salon (which Daphne dragged them to), the pub (where Emlen insisted on trying Firewhisky) and finally, the theater.

Even including the bookshop, it was the place Harry enjoyed the most. That afternoon, they were showcasing the play 'The Tragic Romance of Merlin and Morgan Le Fay', which Harry and his companions bought tickets to. The Objects-charmers of the show were experts, as the special effects and the backdrop produced were one of the best that Harry had seen in a long time. Clearly, no money had been spared in putting on the play; the banshee was real, as was the centaur, though how the producer had gotten his hands on them Harry did not know. On his left, an extremely excited Francis snapped photographs of the rare creatures that appeared throughout the play with his new camera. Thankfully, Emlen had put a silencing spell on the device, or Harry would have had to break said camera.

Throughout the play, Harry noted that Bottlewick was behaving rather strangely. Seated to Daphne's immediate right, she kept glancing over at Harry, who was on Daphne's left, and constantly toyed with her luxuriant copper-coloured hair. By the end of the play, Harry was fully convinced that the girl was indeed trying to flirt with him, a fact which he tucked away, to be thought about later, with a smirk.

It seemed that this was a day for strange behavior though. When Harry and the other guys excused themselves to use the restroom at the end of the show, he spotted something interesting; a soft buzzing filled his ears and a hazy blur shimmered in front of him, at the end of the long corridor, just after the turn leading to the restroom. Narrowing his eyes, for Harry knew the signs of a strong privacy ward when he saw one, Harry did some swift Arithmancy calculations, and activated his special sight. The soft shimmer of intricately spun pale blue lines appeared before him even as Harry, in a sudden flash of Gryffindorish rashness, raised his wand with a small smirk. Timing himself perfectly, he traced two runes in the air and aimed it just at the spot where the lines of the wards met and brought the wards down with skill and finesse.

Only to see the sight of two students with flushed faces and mussed hair kissing. Which, in itself, wasn't that big of a deal. However, when one of the student was Sidonie Orianna Blishwick, Head Girl of Durmstrang institute, and the other was one Ekaterina Anja Durov...well, that was another thing altogether. A far more interesting situation, in fact. Harry never forgot the problems that

Ekaterina had caused him in his second year, even if she had finally given up supporting Ivan and joined the Blood Ravens last year.

Harry had been slightly surprised when Ekaterina had managed to join the Night Serpents' closest rival. Now however, looking at the blue-haired girl's body, which was draped around Blishwick, everything became clear to Harry. Glancing to his left, he noticed that Francis had automatically brought out his camera. Catching his Group member's eye, Harry nodded crisply. Before the two girls could spring apart, Francis had already snapped a few photos of them, even as he grinned widely.

"Riddle!" Blishwick snarled, her face contorting into a fearsome mask. "You little..." Unfortunately for her however, Harry was not intimidated. "Miss Blishwick. I do apologize for interrupting you. Pray, do not stop on my account," Harry said smoothly, even as he allowed his smirk to widen. He had Blishwick now and she knew it. Their little dance of power had come to an end prematurely. And it was all because Harry had the damnedest best luck in the world.

While homosexuality was tolerated in the wizarding world, it was upon the condition that the persons involved were discreet about it, unless one was powerful enough such that the slight disdain did not matter. However, for one such as Blishwick, who was from a relatively minor branch of the Blishwick family, and who was already engaged to the youngest generation's heir of the Durov family, it would be a tremendous scandal if word got out that she was instead involved with a minor offspring of said family of her own gender. A double snub, if there was ever one. Really, I never expected Blishwick to be so rash. You would have thought that she, with the ability to become Head Girl, would have more sense than that.

One look at the murderous glances Blishwick was shooting him and the protective arm around the blue-haired girl's shoulder though, and realization dawned on Harry. Ah, right. Father always said that weak emotions like love makes people do strange, inexplicable things. It is no wonder that he often warns me to steer clear of them.

In the meantime..."Miss Blishwick, if you would like to have tea with me next Friday afternoon, you are welcome to drop by our common room. I bid you good day." Harry inclined his head slightly, smiled politely, then left, even as his brain whirled furiously as he calculated which route to take: should he blackmail the Head Girl? Or allow the

photograph to leak out and watch her standing fall? Both were equally feasible, though only one would afford him the greatest pleasure...Harry's sadistic smirk caused Emlen and Francis to exchange slight shudders.

Well, who would have thought indeed, that that small move to get the students permission to visit Kaltes in his play for power would yield such an unexpectedly large reward?

On Valentine's Day, Harry draped his arm over Amelia Bottlewick, his newest girlfriend, amidst the pink ribbons and heart-shaped decorations that had been put up in the Hall courtesy of the female Prefects. Soon enough however, he gazed over at the Blood Raven's table in the Great Hall. To say that they were in great disarray was an understatement. Harry had ordered that the photograph be leaked to a tabloid magazine a couple of days ago, and the Blood Ravens were still dealing with the fall-out. In fact, quite a number had joined his Group, after Sidonie Blishwick had taken a leave of absence from the school, presumably to deal with the fall-out with her pure-blood family.

In a single sneaky move, Harry had destroyed the Blood Ravens, the longest-lasting Group in Durmstrang history. After the removal of their leader, Harry had then incited in-fighting amongst them with a few casually placed words with the Blood Ravens prefects, who were now eager to curry favour with him. The resulting instability in the Blood Ravens had allowed Harry to lure some of their best away – the Night Serpents were now the largest and most talented Group in school.

Amongst the students and quite a few of the staff members, Harry's power was absolute. After seeing how he had crushed his enemies easily, after his display of powers in the duel last year, his continued academic excellence, his display of his influence over the Highmaster and his destruction of the status quo, none dared to challenge him. And Harry made good use of this. He reached out to secure the loyalties of the most talented, most of whom he invariably drew into his Group, even as he left some in positions of command in other Groups. As a result, by the time Harry was done, he was, acknowledged by consensus, the uncrowned Dark Prince of Durmstrang. Recruitment for his father's cause amongst the sixth and seventh-years had never been easier.

Harry assigned Daphne, Aleron and Emlen to assist him with the recruiting – they were the most eloquent and approachable of those that he actually trusted to a large degree. It was here that Daphne's social skills, Aleron's organizational skills and Emlen's jovial mask were extremely useful. By the end of many meetings with Harry and the trio, most of the forty or so upper-year students were fully convinced of the Dark Lord's ideals. Though many still required a small nudge before they were ready to join his army, Harry was confident that by the time he left the school, he would have gained his father at least ten new recruits from the current batch of seven years, and even more supporters.

But that was still a few months from now. There were more things that Harry would rather concentrate on now, such as indulging himself in the perfectly willing girlfriend he had by his side, whom he was certain had all but flung herself at him in hopes of gaining influence and status. Well, Amelia would get her wish...but only until Harry tire of her.

Prefectural Elections just before Easter holidays. With his influence, Harry easily got his followers elected – Aleron and Silas would again be serving as Prefects (Harry decided to allow Silas a second chance), as were Daphne and Emlen, as well as two fifth-years from his Group, Rune Russwurm and Claus Schneider. With six Prefects out of eighteen from his Group and the Head Girl a wreck, it was more apparent than ever that Harry was in charge.

That Easter, Harry was assigned another mission by the Dark Lord. This time, it was not of killing but of negotiation – he was to convince one of the clans of Centaurs, notorious for their neutrality, to join the Dark. The Dark Lord wished to unite many magical creatures under his banner.

Apparating into the forest in Britain with spells cast to prevent the Ministry from tracking him, Harry met up with Rosier and four other Death Eaters beneath the dense canopy of the trees that cast long shadows on the ground. Despite the afternoon sunlight, the forest gave off a certain degree of gloom and darkness that not even the forests flanking Durmstrang did.

"Young Master," Rosier greeted respectfully, ignoring the gasps of the other Death Eaters. Harry hid his smirk, keeping his expression neutral behind his silver mask. If Rosier felt no need to be discreet,

no doubt his father would be introducing him to the rest of the Death Eaters soon. Currently however, Harry still found himself being eyed curiously by the common Death Eaters not in his father's Inner Circle.

Stepping into a clearing, Harry led the way to a dozen centaurs, their proud, muscular bodies rippling in the sunshine. His gaze fell on the leader – a dappled grey male with dark hair – and whose hands Harry shook solemnly. "May the stars shine upon our alliance. I, Harrison Maximus Riddle, will be representing the Dark Lord in our discussions."

The leader stared at Harry for long moments with his liquid brown eyes before offering his hand. Besides him, a chestnut-haired centaur with dark brown body stamped his hoof angrily at the ground, "A foal. They sent a foal to lead the negotiations with us! An insult, Aeolus, this is an insult!"

Aeolus, leader of one of the largest clan of centaurs in Britain, stared at Harry even as he replied, "What Kosmos has pointed out has some logic. What say you, Dark Child?" Raising his head to meet the challenge, Harry allowed his magical aura to flare out. While it might not be as powerful as the Dark Lord's, Harry was pretty sure that it was dark enough. And impressive enough, if the slight shudders from the centaurs were anything to go by.

"I say that age is of no matter, Aeolus. What does matter, however, is power." Harry allowed his eyes to travel over the gathered centaurs, guessing that the intensity of his gaze just might get through to them. "Power is everything. With power shall come the freedom all so dearly craves. What do you have to gain from this alliance, you ask? Everything, I say.

"As things are, you and yours stand to lose everything. The Ministry will not leave you alone much longer – surely you've heard of the anti-human laws currently being floated around the Wizengamot?" Planted there, no doubt, on the Dark Lord's orders, but Harry was not going to tell the centaurs that. Raising his hands, he gestured to the trees surrounding the clearing. "Soon they will encroach upon your forests. Chase you out in the name of civilization. What they do not know, and cannot appreciate, is that you already have a civilization of your own. The Dark Lord knows this and is ready to offer you this: a forest of your own where you can live undisturbed forevermore, upon the successful creation of the new world.

"We offer freedom! And power. Grab this opportunity with your own hands." Harry finished, allowing his emerald eyes to meet Aeolus' dark ones. For a long moment, Aeolus did not speak but merely gazed at Harry, as if to judge his sincerity. At length, Aeolus said, "The stars have shown us signs, Dark Child. Your presence...a shift in the balance. The prophecy is no more."

Cryptic words. Harry narrowed his eyes as he filed the words away to report to his father later. Then, finally, the words he was waiting for. "We will serve the Dark Lord upon this condition: freedom in the event of his victory." Aeolus held out his hand and Harry grasped in with a tight smirk.

It was a successful mission. Harry hoped he had managed to redeem himself in his father's eyes.

After Easter, Harry broke up with Amelia Bottlewick after getting annoyed with her incessant flirting one day, when he was trying to concentrate on his studies. Amelia was extremely clingy, but in the end, a stern glare from Harry had gotten her to leave him alone.

"Relationship problems, Young Master?" Aleron, who had just watched Amelia storm out of the now almost-deserted common room, asked softly, not wishing to anger his young master, but unwilling to leave things be without voicing his concern. The young master waved him off dismissively, even as his eyes never left his Necromancy textbook. "She doesn't matter – it's not a problem."

Aleron knew he should leave it at that. The young master said that it was not a problem, ergo, it wasn't a problem. But he had seen the young master break up with two girls in the span of five months, with neither of the relationships lasting any longer than two months. Since they were the first relationships that his young master was involved in, Aleron could not help but feel worried.

Lowering himself to one knee, Aleron gazed up at his young master. Steeling himself, he hesitantly said, "I apologize if I seem presumptuous...but this isn't healthy, my prince." He lowered his head and allowed his worry to lace his voice, as he knew that he'd be reprimanded for overstepping his bounds. Nevertheless, that was a chance he was willing to take, as long as the young master would heed his words.

Sure enough the young master closed his textbook carefully before turning to Aleron, a cool expression on his face. Grabbing Aleron sharply by the chin, the young master wrenched his head upwards so that Aleron met his gaze. Despite the sharp pain, Aleron remained silent. Instead, he allowed his eyes to speak for him as he beseeched the young master to listen to his words. After a while, the young master dropped his fingers. "Your concern is noted, Aleron. You are dismissed." Knowing better than to continue after a second dismissal, Aleron bowed and retired to his room.

Relationships were the least of Harry's concerns as he waited his turn in the rather dingy classroom with the fifth-years to be called for his Wards and Necromancy Practical of his OWLs. At length, a neutral voice, which nevertheless held a tremor of terror, issued from the next door classroom. "Riddle, Harrison."

Harry stepped into the next room, giving Frederick Flint, who appeared to be overseeing the examinations today, a sharp smirk. Flint practically paled before him, before gesturing him to the nearest free examiner without meeting Harry's eyes. Noting the wrinkled face, sharp eyes and the bearded chin, Harry realized that it was the same examiner who had tested him in Charms the year prior. "Good afternoon, Professor Dragonov." Harry greeted the old wizard courteously, shaking the hands of the professor.

"Good afternoon to you too, Mr. Riddle! A pleasure to see a young prodigy like you again." Professor Dragonov exclaimed. "The pleasure is all mine, Professor Dragonov," Harry said smoothly, even as he took a seat across from the professor.

Professor Draganov beamed, then waved a hand airily at the box on his table. "Shall we start with Wards then, Mr. Riddle? Your task is to open this box as quickly as you can." Harry inclined his head politely, then turned his attention to the innocuous-looking box on the table. Activating his special sight, he saw that the box was wrapped in a cage of golden lines, intricately so, with quite a number of alarms and curses built in. Compared to the wards that Harry encountered protecting the homes of his victims however, the ward on the box was a piece of cake. Concentrating, Harry used his wand to focus his magic on the knots of the wards, teasing and prodding, occasionally stopping to disarm the alarms or curses. And...voila. Harry aimed his magic just so; at the most crucial knot of them all,

and the ward unraveled silently, disappearing from his sight. Flicking his wand in the box's direction, Harry lifted the lid of the box magically. The whole process, from start to finish, had not taken longer than three minutes.

"Bravo, Mr. Riddle! Beautifully and skillfully done." Draganov nodded his head approvingly, marveling at the skills of the young man sitting across him. The best student so far had taken almost fifteen minutes to succeed, and here this young man was, taking less than a fifth of the time. A prodigy indeed. Modest too, if the polite thanks from the young man was anything to go by.

"Now, can I ask you to build a strong, advance-warning ward around this box? Think of it this way: the owner is a man wishing to hide certain secrets from his lady wife in this box." Draganov winked, then sat back and watched. After five minutes, Harrison Riddle placed the box back onto the table and conjured a small stone. "This stone will give indication of the warning, Professor." Harrison Riddle had informed him with a charming smile. Using his most discreet diagnostic charm, Draganov was most surprised when a dark glow emitted from the stone. Touching the stone, he noted that it emitted a heat that was quite noticeable.

"Exemplary, Mr. Riddle. Were the owner to wear this, he would most certainly have discreet and advance warning should anyone try to open the box. Why, even the most discreet of diagnostic charms set off the alarms! And I can see that your wards are intricately done indeed. Well done!" Draganov complimented, his eyes sparkling. Ah, this was why he had chosen to become a professor. To see the first successes of bright young minds!

Harry hid a smirk at Draganov's compliment, even as out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Frederick Flint trembling. Truly, it had been so easy to perform the Wards OWLs that Harry wondered why he had even bothered studying for it.

Now, for Necromancy...

The next night, Harry found himself wrapped in his black fur-lined cloak in the open field outside the castle, waiting for his turn to take the examination with Alexei and four fifth-years. Necromancy was not a popular subject indeed. Two of the fifth-years went first, each disappearing behind one out of two privacy wards on the field. At

length, they reappeared, looking immensely drained and tired. Waving to Harry with exhausted smiles on their faces, they left for the castle.

At last, it was Harry's and Alexei's turns. Glancing over at Alexei, he saw that the boy was even paler than usual; it was a sign of how important he had come to view this examination as. "I have confidence in you, Alexei." Harry suddenly said, unsure of why he was actually comforting his friend. Perhaps it was because the teenager looked extremely lost, stirring up the protective instincts in Harry that he had towards everyone he considered his?

In any case, Alexei straightened at Harry's words. Bowing slightly, he managed to flash Harry a shaky smile. "Thank you, my prince." And with that, he went forth to disappear behind one privacy ward, while Harry headed for the other. He felt a slight tickle as he stepped through the wards, and knew that it had been modified so that it allowed humans entry and exit. What he did not expect to see, however, was the many corpses that were scattered throughout the field, some half-rotted away, some merely skeletons, while others still looked as if they could be sleeping.

Narrowing his eyes, Harry did not startle when a shadowy, hooded figure glided to his side. "Harrison Riddle." Harry turned a bland expression on the figure and gave him a polite nod. "Good evening, Professor." A small chuckle issued from the figure, even as the man lowered his hood to reveal the visage of one of the examiners, a Lykaios Melas who had examined Harry in Dark Arts the previous year. "Not easily frightened I see. It is an advantage for a Necromancer not to be afraid of the Dark."

Why should I be afraid of the Dark when I am one of the Dark myself? I am the son of the Dark Lord... Harry thought with amusement, even as he lifted a shoulder in an elegant shrug. "The Dark holds nothing that I fear, Professor." Lykaios Melas turned an intense gaze on the student, then gestured to the corpses, eerily bathed in the glow of the moonlight. "Indeed. In that case, Mr. Riddle, please summon at least three zombies from these corpses."

Harry nodded once, then made his way through the corpses, using the techniques that Professor cel Rau had taught them to identify the corpses that were most easily animated as zombies. Fresh wizarding corpses which were tainted with Dark magic, no matter if it

the person had practiced Dark magic in life, or had been killed with Dark magic...Reaching out with his own magic, Harry easily identified four, no five of them, which he would have the least difficulty animating.

Then, using a summoning spell, Harry laid the five corpses side by side in a small clearing. Ignoring the presence of Melas, Harry conjured a small silver knife from thin air, then used it to cut open his left wrist. Ensuring that all the blood trickled into another small silver bowl that he had conjured, Harry then used his wand to trace bloody runes on the foreheads of said corpses.

Behind him, he heard Melas suck in a breath. Usually, this stage was done by a mere flicking of blood onto the corpses, but Harry knew that tracing the blood into runes of binding would work even better. Then, the binding done, Harry looked up into the sky and did some swift calculations. Just when a cloud drifted over the moon, Harry raised his wand and begun the summoning of enough Dark Magic to animate the corpses. Whispering the words beneath his breath, he waved his wand in an intricate pattern, a modification of the wand gestures that Professor cel Rau had taught them. "Ut heir di atrum senior, ego voco vox di atrum. Vox di obscurum , temerarius meus dico!"

As Harry ended his words, the moon broke out from the cloud cover. A dark rush of power filled him as Dark Magic obeyed and flowed into him, causing Harry to gasp for breath. Merlin, but it was pure euphoria! Harry could not think of any other word to describe the buzz that he got from summoning Dark Magic. Were it any other time, he would have taken the time to savour the rush, but now, he merely waved his wand again.

As carefully as he could, Harry pushed the Dark Magic into the corpses. For him, this had always been the hardest part. He was powerful, true – much more powerful with Dark Magic than Alexei could ever be. But he lacked the affinity for the dead that only came with talent and a lack of emotions. And so it was, that out of all the Dark Magic filling him, only a very small fraction trickled into the corpses. Thankfully, it was enough to animate them. As the five newly created zombies sat up suddenly, Harry waved his wand again in the pattern that would close the summoning.

There. It was done. Now, a command to show that he had the zombies under control... "Kneel." Harry's voice rang clearly in the dead silent of the night. The zombies obeyed as one, shifting to rest on one knee. Glancing at Melas, he noted that the man had a gleam in his eyes. "Very impressive, Mr. Riddle. The modification of the textbook summoning ritual was extremely fascinating." Harry mentally scorned the professor for his naiveté. The only reason why he had modified the summoning was so that he could manage to raise five zombies. If he had had a greater affinity for the dead, Harry knew that he would not have even needed to use the summoning – a mere call would do the same work. Melas probably thought Harry wanted to show off his prowess at Necromancy...

Well, in the end, it did not matter one whit to Harry what Melas thought, as long as he got his 'Outstanding'.

The year ended with Harry giving a speech at the leaving feast as Head Boy of Durmstrang. When his eyes roved through the crowd, many of the sixth and seventh years inclined their heads to him in respect – the new recruits that he had gained for the Dark Lord his father. And when he finished his speech, everyone applauded loudly, before someone in the crowd raised his glass and murmured, "Dark Prince." And soon, everyone echoed the person in a toast to Harry.

Accepting their homage with a small nod, Harry could not help but feel a deep satisfaction with himself. Here was the fruit of four years of Harry's labour, finally ready for the reaping. And thus did Harry's fourth year at Durmstrang end.

Thank you all for your encouragement and support. This is the end of Harry's fourth year at Durmstrang - frankly, a point in the story I never thought I'd reach. I've never written such a long story before (this is more than double the length of my second longest story), and it would not have been possible without all you readers out there:)

Chapter Twenty-Four: Heir

"Mars is bright tonight. The winds of change are upon us." Standing silently in the dark clearing, a grave and solemn Aeolus seemed to resemble a marble statue. Beside him, Kosmos shook his head ferociously, his dark mane flying wild with the resulting movement. At length, he calmed down slightly, even as his eyes expressed his anguish. "Are we doing the right thing, Aeolus? Perhaps we should have opposed the Dark..."

Sighing softly, Aeolus started up at the night skies once more. "Dark as night he is, his nature cannot be denied. And with his presence, Saturn has shifted its position...the Dark is rising, young one. We must look to our herd." And as much as Kosmos disliked the idea of aligning the herd with the Dark, he had nothing to say in the face of his leader's pragmatism.

A good distance away from the forests where the centaurs lived, in a majestic and lofty mansion that exuded dark elegance, one Harrison Maximus Riddle was waiting in the shadows of one white marble pillar of atrium. Disillusioned, Harry waited patiently as the last of the Death Eaters entered the throne room, before removing the disillusionment charm he had cast on himself.

Conjuring a mirror, Harry glanced at his image critically. His jet-black hair was as stylishly messy as ever, his face half-hidden behind a silver mask, leaving only his bright emerald green eyes, his full lips and delicate chin in sight. He had left his silver-buttoned black collared dress shirt semi-untucked, so that one tail was left hanging haphazardly over his black slacks. The sleeves of his dress shirt were folded up, so that his forearms were bare. Grinning to himself, Harry wondered if his father would be able to resist scolding him for the casualness he had managed to instill in his formal wear in front of an audience – the Dark Lord was rather insistent when it came to neatness.

Currently, the Dark Lord was in the darkly decorated throne room, dealing with last of the mundane matters that he attended to at every meeting, before he moved on to the most important matter on his agenda today. Rising from his black marble throne, he allowed one corner of his mouth to tilt upwards as all the Death Eaters assembled in neat rows before him turned their full attention to him. The tension in the air was palpable; Lord Voldemort rarely rose from

his throne unless there was some serious matter to address – usually the torture of some hapless Death Eater.

But not today. No, Voldemort's purpose today was far more benign. "My friends," Voldemort began in his cold, smooth voice, addressing his followers with an almost amiable tone, a tone which he had not used in ages. "For the past couple of years, the more observant of you should have noticed the presence of one additional person in our ranks. In fact, the more fortunate of you would have had the opportunity to join him on raids. He was the one who secured the alliances of Greyback and the centaurs and also the one who led the raid against the Hopkirks, the Jones and the Vances." Not all of which was the absolute truth, but what was the point of being a Dark Lord if he could not stretch the truth?

Voldemort watched as some Death Eaters stiffened at that. No doubt they were surprised that he was finally addressing this enigma that had plagued them for years. Before today, he had never before addressed the subject – the few foolish Death Eaters not already in the know who had dared to question him about it found themselves facing the full brunt of his wrath. Voldemort smirked cruelly, drawing out the moment, before he finally continued, "My friendss, he will be officially joining our ranks as my heir – the Dark Prince." It was a name he had selected because of its familiarity to his son, easily explained as a schoolyard nickname were any of his followers less discrete than they were supposed to be.

With a small gesture and a brush of his magic, Voldemort opened the double doors at the opposite end of the throne room, to reveal a slender figure clad in black, a silver mask and an arrogant smirk on his face. Voldemort had to control a slight twitch of irritation as he took in his son's attire. The brat...he did that on purpose. Voldemort knew that from the mischievous gleam in Harry's eyes, apparent only to those who knew him well.

Nevertheless, this was not the time and place to call him on it, and Harry, impudent brat that he was, knew it too. Voldemort suppressed his urge to hex the boy and watched as Harry strode up to the edge of the raised dais upon which his throne set, before sinking gracefully onto one knee just below the dais. "My lord," Harry murmured, bowing his head slightly. He did not however, kiss Voldemort's robes – it was one part of the greeting Voldemort had decided he could do without from his son.

"Hold out your left arm." Voldemort stated. Yes, tonight was the night he would Mark his son, to make official the decision that his son had chosen two summers ago. Pride, that of a father for an accomplished son, filled the Dark Lord even as Harry raised his head and offered his left arm.

Staring up into his father's crimson, intense eyes, Harry allowed a genuine smile to cross his lips. This was his choice, his wish, to aid his father in his goals and he was looking forward to the tangible symbol of his decision that was to be burned into his skin. Harry braced himself as the Dark Lord drew his wand and pressed it into Harry's left forearm.

"Do you swear your loyalty, now and forevermore, to me and to the Dark?" Voldemort begun the short ritual with an abbreviated form of the vows he usually made his Death Eaters swear. "Yes my Lord, I do so swear." Harry's words were clear and ringing, betraying none of his excitement.

"Morsmodre silveris vestigium." Voldemort whispered. Clenching his teeth together, Harry rode out the pain as the burning fire on his left arm seemed sink into his very veins and to spread throughout his entire bloodstream – which was actually not far from the truth, since the Dark Mark worked by spreading its magic throughout one's entire being, into the very magical core of the person. The Dark Lord was a possessive master; once a wizard or witch swore their loyalty, it meant a life-long service.

Not that Harry had any problems with that. He knew that his father had been initially reluctant to formalize his decision. It was funny really, how the Dark Lord, who usually took advantage of others mercilessly, had been so fatherly when it came to decisions regarding Harry's life. Harry's maturity and accomplishments even at his tender age however, had changed the mind of the Dark Lord. Which was why his father had chosen this night, the night before Harry's fifteenth birthday, to grant Harry's wish – to be acknowledged as his father's heir.

Then, at last, the marking was over. Harry glanced down at his left arm – right in the middle of his arm was a tattoo of the Dark Mark, a skull with a serpent slithering out from the mouth-hole, embossed in bright silver on Harry's fair flesh. No, this was not the same Dark

Mark that Voldemort marked his Death Eaters with, this was a mark that his father had specially modified for him. While the others mark would burn steadily upon being called, Harry's merely gave a slight tingle, while the others could call upon Voldemort by touching the mark, Harry could actually communicate verbally with his father should he invoke his mark, though it required a large amount of magical energy. And best of all, Harry's mark was also connected to all the other Death Eaters in his father's service – he could summon each and every one of them, just like his father, although they could not contact him directly.

"Rise, my son." Voldemort's command interrupted Harry's thoughts. Harry rose with a casual elegance that stood testament to all the hours that Uncle Lucius had spent teaching him pureblood etiquette over the years. Knowing instinctively what his father wanted, he turned to face the Death Eaters with a graceful twirl. "My friends, behold the Dark Prince!"

For a moment, the room remained deadly silent. Then, one Death Eater, whom Harry identified as Lucius Malfoy, stepped forth and bowed, murmuring, "My prince..." His words were soon picked up by the other Death Eaters, who practically tripped over their enunciation of the title in their haste not to be perceived as a dissenter. "My prince..." Their murmurs echoed in the throne room, like melodious waves cascading up and down. Music, it was, to Harry's ears. Raised by the Dark Lord, he had been taught to appreciate power from a young age, and this – the power he held over his father's followers – was a heady vintage indeed.

"His name and identity shall remain a secret for now. The only thing that you need to know is that he is my son and heir and shall be treated with the same respect you give to me." Voldemort continued speaking, even as Harry smirked at the Death Eaters who had looked up at the last sentence.

Severus Snape had barely managed to school his face into a neutral expression when the Dark Lord, after a long meeting, had introduced his bloody heir! An heir. The Dark Lord had an heir. It was a fact, which, no matter how many times Severus repeated it mentally, did not seem to fully sink into his mind.

And to top it off, said heir was the boy with the silver mask...There had been rumours, amongst the Death Eaters a couple of years

back, of there being a teenager with a silver mask, dangerous, lethal and well-versed in the Dark Arts, who had participated in raids. Some said he was the harbinger of death, that the raids the boy with the silver mask went on tended to be the most bloody with the most fatalities, others thought he was a Dark creature of sorts, while still others thought he was a high-ranking Death Eater even above those in the Inner Circle... The rumours had surged, ebbed then resurfaced, many times, yet no matter how Severus had tried to verify the veracity of the rumours, he had often met with blank refusals to answer, or far-fetched tales of a very powerful Dark wizard that were obviously exaggerated. It had prompted him to dismiss the rumours as just that – rumours.

Yet here he was, right in front of his very own eyes, the boy with the silver mask. Slender figure, leanly muscled, from what Severus could see of his physique, his observant eyes taking in details he was sure Dumbledore would want to know. Slight above average height, just below six feet, with raven black hair, though of course, hair colour was something easily changed. Everything about the boy's physical appearance hinted at his youth. And yet, the way he held himself – it proved that he was no mere boy. His words had been...controlled, confident and clear, though Severus could not make out much of his voice, considering that the boy, no, the Dark Prince had only spoken one sentence so far.

And when the Dark Lord practically ordered that the Dark Prince's identity was to remain a secret, Severus was intrigued; his Slytherin side sniffed a very powerful secret, and he was loath to have to leave it hidden. However, his self-preservation instincts were nevertheless, stronger than his curiosity, so he resigned himself to silently watching events unfold.

Later that night, the Dark Prince led the Death Eaters on his first official mission: a mission which the Dark Lord had kept under wraps prior to that night.

Bellatrix Lestrange watched fondly from her position in the alley as Harrison stalked silently towards her hiding place, down the streets of Hogsmeade, amidst the thatched cottages and shops that somehow still managed to look cheery despite the deep cover of the night. Instead of jealousy, she had felt a strange stirring of pride when the Dark Lord had introduced Harrison as his heir – the Dark Prince. Maybe what Rodolphus had said was true...perhaps she

had truly come to regard the heir of her lord as a son of her own, or at least, a favourite nephew.

Over the years, it had been a great pleasure for Bellatrix to watch Harrison grow into his powers, even when his powers had surpassed hers sometime between his thirteenth and fourteenth birthday – the boy had such a natural affinity for the Dark Arts that Bellatrix sometimes thought privately that even if he was adopted, he even more of a son to the Dark Lord as any biological child of her master could be.

And the Dark Lord knew it too. Which was why Harrison had been entrusted with this mission – a mission meant to put pressure on the Ministry, to strike fear in the hearts of the Wizarding population, a mission meant to remind them of the Dark Lord's second rise. The Dark had been quiescent since his Christmas attack on Azkaban – it would not do for the populace to forget that he was still active amongst them.

Hence the planned mission. Bellatrix knew that her husband had been ordered to anonymously tip off a few reporters, a tip couched in such a way as to stir no alarm, but to draw the reporters to the village like flies to a garbage dump. The Dark Lord intended for the raid on Hogsmeade to be well publicized...

"Put up the two-way anti-apparation and Portkeying wards." Such was Harrison's authoritative and commanding tone that even the Death Eaters who had privately expressed their concern at Harrison's new position as the Dark Prince did not dawdle and immediately set to work. The wards would be keyed into Harrison's magical signature, Bellatrix knew, so that he was the only one who would be able to collapse it. It wasn't solely due to paranoia or distrust of the other Death Eaters that prompted such an action – it was the fact that Harrison was the only one capable of being magically attuned to the Wards at the level required.

And then, as Harrison left her hiding place, one of the many hiding places that Death Eaters occupied in the entire street, Bellatrix felt the slight increase in air pressure that accompanied the raising of the wards. The few alert wizards or witches strolling along High Street of Hogsmeade felt it too, for they immediately held their wands out at the ready, even as the more cowardly of them started scurrying for cover.

Without a single word, Harrison pointed his wand upwards and shot silver sparks high into the night sky. Clad in an open, flowing black robe over a black shirt and black leather pants, a silver half-mask on his face, Bellatrix thought that her...protégé had an aura of command. A few seconds later, at that signal, Death Eaters burst out of their hiding places and headed straight for their targets. Some rounded up the witches and wizards on the streets that had been too slow or just plain ignorant of the impending attack, some broke into the shops and started smashing up the wares, while others attacked the shopowners in the shops.

All, in all, it was a scene of mayhem and destruction, something Bellatrix reveled in. Cackling maniacally, she sent a curse at a hapless passer-by who stared wide-eyed at the appearance of the white-masked black-robed, hooded Death Eaters, before falling to the ground screaming in agony. Yes, it was exhilarating indeed, using her favourite curse on innocent bystanders...Bellatrix had to remind herself that she was not here to indulge. No indeed, she was here to be a back up for her sweet Harrison, her sweet boy who had already killed five passer-bys as he strode up the street.

Giggling, Bellatrix hurried after Harrison with Severus Snape and a group of other less experienced Death Eaters, as the Dark Prince headed straight to a ramshackle, decrepit looking building that looked as if it would fall over at any moment. Ah ha, the Hog's Head. Ickle Harrikins has grown up to become such an intelligent boy! Bellatrix caressed her wand fondly even as she stopped outside the grainy wooden entrance, just off to the side of Harrison, who appeared to be contemplating something only he could see with narrowed eyes. Then, a smirk flashed across his lips and he waved his wand casually.

Bellatrix knew that Harrison had disabled whatever wards there were on the entrance when he casually Vanished the door with another wave of his wand. Then, she followed him into the room even as he gestured for one Death Eater to guard the door, in the unlikely event that the owner of the Hog's Head attempted to escape.

Inside the dingy darkness of the Hog's Head, Harry took in the dirty windows, the rough wooden tables and the concrete floor so covered with dirt that little of the original concrete could be seen. Three occupants occupied various tables in the room, though at this

time of the night, the lack of customers was not surprising. Behind the rough wooden bar, an old barman with a high forehead, tufts of white hair, a long straggly beard and an appearance resembling a goat dropped the dirty rag with which he had been polishing glasses.

Suppressing a sneer, Harry coolly ordered, "Surround the room." Immediately, the Death Eaters spread out and stationed themselves at the various windows and the fireplace. Snape placed himself at the door leading to the kitchen while Bellatrix eagerly made a beeline for the other occupants in the room – Harry resolved to keep an eye out for the Potions Master, a man of whom his father was still suspicious. Sparing the other occupants a cursory glance, Harry noted that they seemed to be shady characters of various degrees of disrepute.

Throwing a smirk his aunt's way, Harry waved carelessly to the bystanders. "Aunt Bella, go ahead and indulge. I shall deal with Aberforth Dumbledore alone." He headed straight to the bar and directed a predatory smirk at the barman. "Will you die quietly? Or do you intend to put up a futile resistance?"

Out of the corner of his eyes, Harry noted that his aunt immediately started enjoying herself with the bystanders, one of whom, apparently, was a goblin. If there was one thing Bellatrix despised even more than Muggles, it was creatures. It was no wonder then, that she had such a beautiful smile on her face that suggested that Christmas had come early for her.

"I don't have to talk with the likes of you!" Aberforth Dumbledore spat angrily, aiming his wand at Harry and shooting a curse his way. "The likes of me? Why, Aberforth Dumbledore, you don't even know who I am!" Harry dodged the curse easily enough, then started engaging the old barman in a duel. He allowed all his anger at Albus Dumbledore, the doddering old fool of a man who had caused him to live six years of his life with the abusive Dursleys, to be directed at his younger brother.

Spells flew back and forth, shattering even the steady furniture of the Hog's Head, blasting holes in the already ugly walls of the bar. Once more, Harry allowed himself to indulge in the pleasure of dueling with Dark Magic, though not to let himself go too fully that he was unaware of his surroundings. No, Aberforth was too

experienced a duelist for Harry to be able to survive should he make that mistake.

No sooner did Harry have the thought did he see Aberforth point his wand at Harry. Immediately, Harry felt a soft breeze from his back. Throwing himself sideways, Harry managed to keep an eye on Aberforth while transfiguring the floating heavy table, which would have hit him had he not reacted in time, into a flock of ravens, which Harry directed to attack Aberforth. Scratch marks littered Aberforth's face and arms by the time he managed to get rid of the birds, which Harry used as a distraction to send three dark curses in succession at Aberforth – one, a spell meant to drain the stamina of the wizard, hit.

Severus Snape watched in disbelief as the boy, no, the Dark Prince, dueled Aberforth Dumbledore in a one-on-one battle as an equal. He knew the boy would be powerful, yes, it was only to be expected, given that he was the heir of the Dark Lord, but by Merlin's beard, he had never expected the Dark Prince, as young as he appeared to be, to be able to stand against Aberforth Dumbledore in a duel! While Aberforth might not be as skilled a duelist as his older brother, or even Filius Flitwick, he more than made up for it in terms of experience and aggressive fighting style. Yet the Dark Prince countered his experience and aggressiveness with new, creative Dark curses and dueling techniques, many of which Severus, even with his experience, had never seen before. And speed. The Dark Prince was fast – extremely so. And he had instincts which seemed to be perfectly honed: every time Aberforth threw something at him, even if he could not possibly have seen it, the boy managed to dodge it.

Things did not look well for the brother of the leader of the Light at all. For a moment, Severus wondered if he should step in, if he should take a chance and sneak in an attack to aid Aberforth. But no, even if he were to blow his cover, there was no chance of them getting away, not when the streets were crawling with Death Eaters, not when there was an anti-apparition and portkeying ward over the entire village. There was nothing Severus could do for Aberforth. Squashing the feelings of helplessness, guilt and regret as that thought crossed his mind, Severus reminded himself that it was for the sake of the cause. The very cause he had pledged himself to, for the sake of making amends for his mistakes. For that cause, he had

to keep his position as a double-agent secret. And it wasn't as if he even liked Aberforth...

So it was with a blank, neutral expression on his face that Severus Snape watched as the Dark Prince, after a half-hour of intense battle with Aberforth, shot the killing curse at the exhausted older man. A green flash of light surrounded the goat-like man, who then fell down lifeless – Severus watched numbly as the boy, who should not even have been able to use the curse at that age, smirked in satisfaction. Then casually, without any hint of being disturbed by the death, the Dark Prince turned and shot a jet of purple light at the goblin, who was the last living bystander who had been suffering under Bellatrix's wand. At the pout Bellatrix gave him, the Dark Prince tilted his head slightly. "Aunt Bella, I promise I'll get you a goblin to play with for Christmas this year. This one, alas, will have to die from a slow suffocation. A very slow one..."

Severus Snape had seen many acts of cruelty in his life, many heinous, monstrous acts perpetuated by the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. He felt it safe therefore, to come to one conclusion: the boy was a monster. Undoubtedly.

After leaving the Hog's Head, Harry felt tempted to burn the whole disgusting place to a crisp. Unfortunately, he wanted Dumbledore to see the sight of his dead brother's lifeless body. "A pity, really..." Harry murmured under his breath before he turned his attention away and surveyed the deadly quiet, though occasionally punctuated by screams, streets of Hogsmeade, littered with dead corpses and laughing Death Eaters. Turning to the hiding place of the reporters, he noted with a pleased smirk that all were still alive and well, and had had a front seat in the massacre. Good, none of the Death Eaters touched them. I would hate to have to explain to Father how his plan failed because some Death Eaters could not obey simple orders...on hindsight, I should have put a guard on them.

Putting them out of his minds once he had confirmed with his special sight that they were indeed alive, Harry pointed his wand at the sky. "Morsmordre." With a loudly intoned incantation, Harry sent the Dark Mark into the air, signaling for all Death Eaters to retreat back to the manor.

In the early hours of the morning, Severus Snape swept into the cluttered office of the Headmaster, his face deathly pale, his hands clenched into fists by his side and his lank hair even more greasy than usual. His breathing was rapid, as if he had just been in a fight – or had just suffered a bout of the Cruciatus.

Albus Dumbledore took one look at his spy and immediately gestured the latter to a seat – Severus looked as if he might fall over at any moment. What was it this time? Did Tom torture him again? Since Voldemort's return a few years prior, he had been testing Severus intermittently, trying to find cracks in his spy's façade. Most of these tests took the form of torture...

However, when Severus had finally calmed down somewhat, the first words out of his mouth was not what Albus had been expecting. "He has an heir..." At Albus' blink, the spy laid his palms on the table, gritted his teeth and restated, "Albus, the Dark Lord has an heir – the Dark Prince. And tonight..." He gave a bitter laugh, then sneered biting, "Tonight was his coming out party."

Severus watched with cold eyes as the implications hit the Headmaster. His twinkling blue eyes, usually so bright, dimmed to a swirling darkness as he considered the subtext of what Severus was not saying. Even as the pre-dawn sky seemed to lighten, the mood in the room remained as dark as night.

Massacre at Hogsmeade

Dark Heir reveals himself

In a bold move last night, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named conducted a raid on the wizarding village of Hogsmeade, leaving many dead and even more wounded. At last count, the death toll stood at sixty-four, while the injured number in the hundreds. Through the hands of his proxy, a man wearing a silver mask and robes of a Death Eater, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named left the village in ruins. A Ministry insider confirmed that this was the heir of the He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The source, who wished to remain anonymous, said that, "We've been suspecting this for over a year now, since the attack at Christmas. It's true – You-know-who has an heir."

Notable deaths include that of Celestina Warbeck, popular singing sorceress, Adorabelle Puddifoot, owner of Madam Puddifoot's tea

shop and discoverer of the three modifications of the love potion Amortentia and Aberforth Dumbledore, owner of Hog's Head and brother of the current Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore (for more details, see page 4)

Thus ends the twenty-fourth chapter of this story. I hope it was as enjoyable for you to read as it was for me to write.

I have mostly tried to keep the rate of posting new chapters as frequent as I can - at least once a week. However, I will now have to take some time to organize the plot in Harry's fifth year (in which the Triwizard will be occurring), so the story will be on hold until I can do get the details straight. I expect it to take about 2-3 weeks. Please bear with me, and thanks for sticking with the story until now:)

Chapter Twenty-Five: Hogwarts Year Five - Arrival

Full moon. Dark night. Misty, chilly air, despite it being summer.

None of which Harry could appreciate at the moment, since he was currently cooped up in his father's study, discussing the Dark Lord's plans for Harry's next school year. Feet shoulder-width apart, hands relaxed by his side, Harry stood in front of his father's ornately carved wooden desk, absently aware of the merry crackled of the fire in the dark marble fire place.

At length, Harry tilted his head slightly to one side and voiced the question he had been contemplating since the start of the discussion. "Father, I have been thinking about this – why can't I participate in the Triwizard Tournament? It would further our goals. In fact, as a participant, I'd have fame on my side, which would make it much easier to approach students from the other schools. Even if they are reluctant to consort with another school's champion, there are ways around that."

Voldemort narrowed his crimson eyes as he stared at his heir, standing tall, proud and confident in front of him. His son was intelligent; perhaps too intelligent. How could Voldemort explain that he had the urge to make sure Harry stayed under the radar as much as possible under the crooked nose of the old fool? The second war between the Light, the Dark and the Ministry of Magic was going on as strong as ever. Once Voldemort had revealed himself to the public, the previous Minister of Magic who was under Voldemort's manipulation had been sacked. The new Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour, had been selected despite hard campaigning on Lucius' part. A hardliner against the Dark Lord, Scrimgeour had started cooperating with Dumbledore again. While Voldemort had much of the Ministry under his control, until he could replace Scrimgeour, the war was at a stalemate.

Not to mention the fact that Voldemort was not planning to launch into all-out war until he knew what the prophecy contained. While the Dark Lord firmly believed that Harry would not betray him, well, it would set his mind at rest if he could just find out what the prophecy contained. While Voldemort was not longer operating in secret, it did not mean that he should just waltz into the Ministry to pick up the prophecy – no, that would be admitting to his enemies that the prophecy had a certain hold over him. It was an advantage that

Voldemort was not yet ready to concede. No, the Dark Lord would have to find a way to retrieve the prophecy secretly, without alerting anyone as to the prophecy's absence.

And so Voldemort could afford to indulge in his son's wish to study at Hogwarts, even if it was only for a year. He had pushed Lucius to revive negotiations for the Triwizard, negotiations that had been put on hold after the fiasco (for the Ministry) at the World Cup last summer. He had even ordered Barty, who had influence over the negotiations, to turn it into more of an exchange programme and not only a mere competition. But although the Triwizard Tournament was a great opportunity for his son to establish a foothold amongst the younger generation of Wizarding Britain, and perhaps even find a way for Voldemort to circumvent the wards of Hogwarts, it was also a huge risk, having his heir and horcrux attending a school filled with members of the Order of the Phoenix led by the old coot. And Voldemort's possessive nature simply refused to allow Harry to be in more danger than he already was. Perhaps it was a good thing that he had ordered Barty to allow Dumbledore to impose an age restriction on the competition.

"No. Your identity as both my heir and Harry James Potter must not be discovered. Not yet." Voldemort's reply was curt, even as he watched for Harry's reaction. His son's face was a neutral mask – years of practice had taught his son the ability to hide his feelings even from the Dark Lord, whenever he wished to. And with his current Occlumency skill, even Voldemort was not able to scan his mind without a verbal attack and a strong fight. Yet he suspected that Harry was not fully satisfied with his answer.

After a silent minute, his son inclined his head. "I understand, Father."

Draco Malfoy strode into the train compartment of the Hogwarts Express coolly, his Slytherin friends following at his heels. Seating himself elegantly onto the leather seat nearest the window, he suppressed a smirk as Pansy Parkinson immediately sat next to him, latching herself onto his arm. The dark-haired girl had been interested in him since forever, and over summer, Draco had finally allowed himself to reciprocate slightly, knowing that being seen as a couple with the unofficial leader of the Slytherin girls in their year, and female fifth-year Prefect of Slytherin, would boost his standing

even further. He supposed he liked her well enough as a friend, though he was as yet uncertain whether he did like her romantically...He blinked to clear his head of inane thoughts and focused his attention on his friends.

"It's going to be an interesting year, isn't it?" Draco drawled slightly, smirking at the two males opposite him – Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini, both sitting perfectly straight with proper pure-blood etiquette. Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle had been left outside the door, guarding their compartment, so that no one could enter.

Theo's greenish hazel eyes flashed with amusement, even as he inclined his head in agreement. "What with the Triwizard Tournament and Harrison's presence...I simply can't wait to see what will happen." Blaise's teeth were pearly white as he grinned at that comment. "From the tales you two have told me about the Dark Prince, I suspect it'd be an exciting year indeed. And perhaps he'll manage to put the Gryffindorks in their place..."

Just as Draco was about to admonish Blaise for using Harrison's title in semi-public, there was a loud commotion from outside the compartment. Raising an eyebrow, Draco gestured for Blaise to open the compartment door, even as he rose from his seat. Frowning, all four Slytherins took in the scene outside – Vincent and Gregory were stubbornly blocking the doorway while a red-haired, gangly boy, Ronald Weasley, shouted at the two.

"...need Malfoy to get his pompous ass out here!" Draco caught the tail end of Weasley's words. Now, Draco was not a boy who took well to insults. Yet he found the level of insults that Weasley was wont to use childish and generally not worth his time to even feel insulted over. That did not mean however, that he was about to take that kind of disrespect lying down...Casually, he strolled out of the compartment. "Why, Weasel, pray tell us the reason why you've chosen our compartment to start frothing at...I'm sure all of us would be interested in hearing it." With a smirk, Draco cast a significant glance at all the heads sticking out nearby compartments.

Turning beet-red Weasley practically snarled, "You bloody, stupid git! Malfoy..." Before he could say anything more however, Draco sneered and flicked his wrist. A split second later, he had his wand out from the hostler, and had it pointed at Weasley. "Silencio." Weasley gaped at him, lips flapping, even as his pea-sized brain

tried to process the fact that Draco had somehow gotten the drop on him. Ignoring the silently spluttering boy, Draco turned to give his companion a glance – the Mudblood Granger was currently looking at Weasley worriedly. Before she could release the boy however, Draco drawled, "Now, Granger, perhaps you'd like to enlighten us? Or is this merely another attempt at invading our privacy?" His friends snickered at that, no doubt delighted at the show he was putting on.

Granger's bushy haired looked even curlier than usual as she, forgetting Weasley's plight for the moment, snapped out, "We were merely coming to get you for the Prefect meeting, Head Boy's orders. But your two goons refused to allow us to speak to you, and did not look at all capable of passing the message either!" Draco concealed a frown at Granger's words. True, he did tell Vince and Greg that they weren't to be disturbed at all cost, but did the two idiots truly take him at his word? He would have thought that they would have known to inform him if something truly important came up, like the Prefect Meeting...

Casting Vincent and Gregory a withering glance that vowed that he would be speaking to them later about this, Draco inclined his head as haughtily as he could. "Well in that case, we had best proceed then. Pansy?" He extended his arm to her and waited till she had slid her arm through the crook of his, before heading in the direction of the prefect's carriage, ignoring the Mudblood and Weasel.

Harry's smirk was predatory as the Highmaster of Durmstrang, Igor Karkaroff, announced that he had been chosen as Head Boy for the second year running. While not unheard of, it was a feat that only a few Head Boys had achieved. Of course, what with Frederick Flint long taken care of, and all of the other professors' favour of him and the subservience of the Highmaster to him, it was not a surprise. Harry wondered if Karkaroff thought that he could somehow gain favour with the Dark Prince in this manner, for to his mind, it seemed somewhat foolish to appoint him Head Boy when he was going to be away at Hogwarts for almost the entire year...

"...and in the absence of the Head Boy at the upcoming Triwizard Tournament, the Head Boy shall appoint an acting Head Boy in his stead..." Perhaps Karkaroff isn't as foolish as he looked after all, Harry mused. He narrowed his eyes as the Highmaster went on to announce that Durmstrang would be sending over twenty exchange

students to Hogwarts, from which the champion would be chosen, and that the list would be out by the end of the week, with input from the Head Boy and the Head Girl.

Harry knew that the latter was a mere figurehead, without much power. Whomever he chose as his replacement would be the one who held the reins of power in Durmstrang...and the Highmaster had, with his last statement, ensured that the students knew just who had the power to influence his decisions. Harry looked forward to a week of flattery, buttering-up and bribery. Perhaps he'd be able to add a few rare books to his father's library, or even some useful favours from the children of rich, influential families in Europe...

Late one night, Harry lounged in the soft leather armchair by the fireplace in the common room, watching his second-in-command who was kneeling by his feet. Save for the two, the common room was empty, which explained Aleron's position – the older teenager tended to show his subservience when no prying eyes were around. Although Harry found it strange that Aleron, who was usually so dominant around others, liked to do that, he knew that on some level, it comforted Aleron so he tended to allow it. "Aleron, who do you think I should leave at Durmstrang?" Harry asked idly, even as his fingers toyed with the piece of parchment in his hand.

Meeting his young master's gaze, Aleron clenched his fists slightly. His expression was slightly guilty as he spoke, "I...my prince, I'm afraid I am unable to offer an objective opinion on this issue." Harry eyed Aleron in silence, allowing Aleron to stew uncomfortably for a few minutes before he let soft laughter escape from his lips. "Relax, Aleron. I am well aware of your conflict of interests...which makes me wonder...what would you do, my friend, if I ordered either you or Silas to accompany me to Hogwarts and the other to stay behind?"

Harry suppressed a smirk as his follower shifted his weight slightly. Aleron was not a fool; he was sure that his follower knew the hidden meaning of his question. He watched as Aleron squared his shoulders, met his eyes and bared his soul. "I will follow your orders without hesitation, Young Master. Although I love Silas dearly, your will is my foremost priority." His words were sincere, the emotions in his eyes unmistakable – he had even lowered his Occlumency shields! Not for the first time, Harry wondered just how much Aleron knew, or suspected, of his learning of Legilimency, a skill that Harry had worked hard at the previous year, and only revealed to his

father over the summer holidays. And while Harry was not yet proficient at the skill, he was good enough to brush against Aleron's mind and confirm that what the male had just said was the truth, and nothing but the truth.

"I am very pleased, Aleron," Harry petted the older male on the head lightly. A smirk played about his face even as he continued, "I always reward my followers when they have done well, Aleron. This then, shall be your reward: you will be the Acting Head Boy at Durmstrang in my stead and Silas shall stay to aid you. I expect you to maintain the Night Serpents' power over the student population." The older male's dark blue eyes shone with pure gratitude for a few seconds, before he managed to regain his composure. Bowing his head, Aleron murmured, "I cannot thank you enough, my prince. Be rest assured, I will not fail you."

Harry's lips curled in satisfaction. All was as it should be; he was ready to submit the name list to Karkaroff come morning. Then, in a week's time, it would be off to Hogwarts they go.

The day the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students were to arrive, Martin Charlus Potter found himself excitedly awaiting their arrival just outside the castle, just like many other students. As it was a cold, chilly September evening, he had his thick red and gold scarf wrapped around his neck, and his thick winter cloak on, like all the students waiting outside...

His eyes traversed the student population, all lined up in rows according to year. The entire castle, it seemed, had gathered outdoors including Professor Dumbledore the teachers and of course, his dad, the Dueling Professor. Ha, as if Dad would miss this for anything! James' excitement had shown all week, from the way he lectured his classes (Now, not that I expect you to, but should you get into a duel with any Durmstrang or Beauxbatons student, I want you to uphold Hogwarts' honour and defeat them!) to the way he practically volunteered to be the teacher-in-charge of the exchange students during their time at Hogwarts. Martin smiled as he recalled how his mother, Samantha, had rolled her eyes with exasperation at his father's antics during the fire-call they had earlier this week.

"Exciting, isn't it?" Martin turned to the side to smile at his best friend, Ginevra Weasley, who was also his year-mate. Thank goodness

Professor Dumbledore had allowed him to start school a year earlier, at the insistence of his dad, which meant that he was allowed to start school the same year as Ginny. Or he, being born in October, would have had to wait till the following year...and wouldn't that suck? "Yeah Gin, pretty exciting. How do you think they'd arrive?"

"That is something for me to know and you to find out, isn't it, Potter?" a cool, sneering voice drawled from somewhere behind him. Martin spun around, only to see one Draco Malfoy, in all his blonde pallor, standing right behind him, flanked by his Slytherin sycophants - Theodore Nott, Pansy Parkinson, Blaise Zabini, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. "Malfoy!" Martin spat out, his voice thick with irritation. Really now, it was just his luck. Trust Malfoy to ruin his excited mood! Sometimes, Martin thought he hated Malfoy as much as Ron did, a feat which Ginny thought was impossible...No one, she had reasoned, could hate Malfoy as much as her brother did, though she conceded that perhaps Martin could be a close second.

Malfoy had a bored air around him as he casually flicked away a piece of imaginary lint on his robes. "Yeah, that's my name. Are your brains useful for anything other than pointing out the obvious?" His fellow Slytherins snickered at that, even as Martin felt himself flush at the jab. No, Martin had to tell himself, he would not hex bloody Malfoy into bloody pieces in full sight of the teachers...and his dad. Luckily for him, Ginny intervened with her usual fiery temper, "Stop baiting Martin, Malfoy, and just shut it, won't you?"

A cold glint entered Malfoy's grey eyes as he allowed a sneer to lift the corner of his lips. "And why should I listen to anything you have to say, blood-traitor?" Martin saw the effects of Malfoy's words; a subtle shudder ran through Ginny. He supposed he couldn't blame his best friend, Malfoy could be downright threatening sometimes. Whenever he got the glint in his eyes...It was no wonder that he was called the Ice Prince of Slytherin...

Before Martin could form a suitable retort for his friend however, cries of oohs, and aahs filled the air. And then Dumbledore called out from the back row, where he stood with the other teachers, "Aha! Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!" Martin could see something large, much larger than a broomstick, or indeed, a hundred broomsticks, hurtling across the deep blue sky towards the castle, growing larger all the time.

As the gigantic black shape skimmed over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest, and the lights shining from the castle windows hit it, they saw a gigantic powder-blue, horse-drawn carriage that was the size of a large house soaring towards them, pulled through the air by a dozen golden winged horses each the size of an elephant.

Then, after the carriage had hurtled ever lower, it came to land at a tremendous speed. Crash! Martin heard a few first year girls scream, even as the door of the carriage, which bore a coat of arms of two golden crossed wands, each emitting three stars, opened. Then, a boy in pale blue robes jumped down from the carriage and unfolded a set of golden steps before springing back respectfully. Immediately after, Martin saw a huge – no, gigantic – woman step out from the carriage; Martin had only ever seen one person as large as this woman in his life, and that was Hagrid. As she stepped up forward to greet Dumbledore, who had moved to the front of the students, Martin noted that she had a handsome, olive-skinned face, large black liquid-looking eyes and dark black hair drawn into a shining knob at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to toe in black satin, with many glittering opals decorating her neck and hands.

"My dear Madame Maxime," Dumbledore bowed over the woman's hands. "Welcome to Hogwarts."

Draco, having long since put the obligatory childish spat with Weasley and Potter out of his mind, observed silently the interaction between the Beauxbatons Headmistress and Dumbledore with a watchful eye, even as he noted with interest the Beaubatons' students rather disdainful attitude towards Hogwarts. A rather interesting tidbit, he thought, that Harrison might be able to use...

After the Beauxbatons students had entered the castle, Draco turned his eyes to the lake and waited. For a moment, all was silent, then a loud and eerie noise could be heard drifting towards them from out of the darkness, a muffled rumbling and sucking sound...

Some disturbance was taking place in the centre of the lake. Great bubbles formed on the surface, waves washed down the muddy banks, then, out in the very middle of the lake, a whirlpool appeared. What seemed to be a long, black pole began to rise slowly out of the heart of the whirlpool...

Draco knew it was the mast of the Durmstrang ship even if he hadn't seen the riggings on the pole. Tuning out the excited chatter of the students around him, he watched as the ship rose of the water, slowly and magnificently, gleaming in the setting sun. It had a strange, skeletal look about it, as dim, misty lights shimmered at its portholes. Finally, with a great sloshing noise, the ship emerged entirely. Then, Draco saw the anchor being thrown down into the shallows, and a plank being lowered onto the bank.

People were disembarking, Draco noted that all were dressed in the thick, fur-lined black cloaks over their crimson robes and black leather boots...the man who was leading them up to the castle, however, wore furs that were sleek and silver, just like his short hair and a curly goatee. Ah, that was the Highmaster Karkaroff, then...Draco listened with half an ear open as Karkaroff greeted Dumbledore – his eyes were drawn to the slender figure with jet-black hair and brilliant emerald green eyes beside the Highmaster, who was flanked by two blonde-haired twins.

Draco took a deep breath, then let it out. They had planned this, the first greeting, out carefully. Breaking ranks, Draco and his friends moved forward through the student population even as the slender figure too strode towards him. When they met just in front of the students, just behind Dumbledore and Karkaroff, Draco offered his hand, a polite smile and a small nod. "Harrison, it's a great pleasure to have you here. Welcome to Hogwarts."

Harrison Maximus Riddle's eyes gleamed in amusement even as he allowed a neutral smile to blossom on his face. Taking Draco's hands to shake, his voice was clear and smooth as he replied, "Thank you, Draco. It is indeed a pleasure for us to be at Hogwarts." Behind him, Septimus and Octavius Withers offered Draco a polite nod, as did all the other Durmstrang students that Draco knew. And there it was: the first hint of an establishment of a hierarchy for those who knew how to interpret the signs...the first step in their plans...or rather, Harrison's plans. Draco smirked as he fell into step beside Harrison, aware of the students' watching eyes as the two strode into the Entrance Hall.

James Potter felt a twitch of curiosity at the handshake. Clearly, the Malfoy brat knew the boy from Durmstrang. Which would not be strange if the boy was a pureblood, as students from Durmstrang tended to be, James supposed. The Malfoys' influence extended far

and wide. Even the Potters and Blacks, whose lines were far more ancient than the Malfoys, did not have as much influence in pureblood circles, though James supposed that was the fault of him and Sirius', considering that they had pretty much allowed the influence of their Houses to lapse once they had taken over the mantle of lordship from their fathers. Which would explain why he did not recognize the boy, he supposed, though he had no doubt the boy was the heir to an influential family. With the way he carried himself, the words of polite cordiality...there was no way he could be anything less. Though there was something familiar about his eyes...that shade of green, now where had he seen it before?

Just as James was about to pursue that line of thought however, he suddenly thought of something else – oh no, wasn't he supposed to lead the exchange students to line up in front of the Great Hall? But it was too late, the boy and Malfoy had entered the castle, leading the rest of the students with them. James gave a mental sigh. Being a teacher was just so much work!

Being a Dark Lord was no easy task, Voldemort mused as he contemplated his next move. The prophecy. It had been weighing heavily on the Dark Lord's mind since he had named his son the Dark Prince. Now, more than ever, he could not afford for Harry to betray him. And so, he had to know the full content of the prophecy, for the part which he did know of was not at all concrete on that point. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...

There was a knock on door of his study, to which Voldemort twitched his fingers once. The door swung open silently, only to reveal the straw-coloured hair and rugged face of Barty Crouch. Voldemort watched as Barty stepped into the room and kneeled at a couple of feet away from where Voldemort was currently standing in the centre of the room. "Master," Barty murmured as he clasped his hands behind his back and bowed his head.

"Barty. You will use your disguise in the Ministry to find out everything you can about the Hall of Prophecy in the Department of Mysteries. You are to keep this an absolute secret. Tell no one, not even Harry. Do you understand?" Voldemort ordered in his cold, cruel voice. He waited for Barty to look up, noting the flash of surprise that crossed his Death Eater's face. It was rare for Voldemort to exclude his son from his plans.

Barty however, was well trained, so he merely said, in a clear, eager voice, "Yes, Master." Satisfied, Voldemort nodded once. Then, he changed the subject. "Now, Barty. How goes your infiltration into the Ministry?" This was a small indulgence Voldemort granted only to those Death Eaters he favoured – a period of time for them to extol upon the process of their labour. In reality, the Dark Lord cared nothing about the process – merely the end result. But it was a good way to reward his followers...especially the ones as eager to please as Barty Crouch.

An ocean and many countries away, Aleron Fidel Mulciber peered up into the night sky from the window of his dorm room rather wistfully. The young master had left but earlier that day, and Aleron was already feeling the ache of his absence. Somehow, it simply did not feel right for him – to be in Durmstrang as Acting Head Boy, without the guidance of the young master. All along, Aleron's role has been extremely clear – he was advisor and subordinate to the young master. He gave advice to aid the young master in his plans, and ensured that the young master's plans were carried out.

Now however, Aleron was left to run the school in the young master's absence. Sure, the young master had left him with explicit instructions on the matter. It all boiled down to one thing: Keep the students loyal to and in awe of the young master in his absence. And if he had any difficulties, the young master was merely an owl and a day away...And the young master was himself surrounded by many trustworthy advisors; there were many at Hogwarts who could ensure that the young master's plans were successful in his stead...

"Knut for your thoughts?" An all too familiar voice asked in an uncharacteristic quiet voice. Aleron turned to take in the visage of his lover, Silas Curtis Macnair. As always, he was struck by that special brand of fierce beauty that his lover possessed – the high cheekbones, sharp, hawk-like features and intense brown eyes. Reaching out, he threaded his fingers through Silas' walnut brown hair before allowing his hand to drop. "I was just thinking about the young master." There was such a tone of longing in that sentence that Aleron was sure that if his lover had been any other guy, he would have been in trouble for speaking about another male in that manner.

As it was, Silas merely regarded Aleron with wry amusement. "Should I be jealous?" Seeing that Aleron did not respond to the joke, Silas turned serious. "Aleron...there is no need to worry. The young master will be fine – he has Draco, Emlen and Daphne with him. And the twins. His plans at Hogwarts will be successful." He laid a hand on Aleron's shoulder. "And the young master has a very loyal subordinate here at Durmstrang, who will ensure that his plans at Durmstrang will be successful too."

Aleron tilted his lips upwards in a half-smile. Trust Silas to know of his thoughts and insecurities... "Nay Silas. You're wrong." Silas quirked an eyebrow upward questioningly. With all the conviction he felt, Aleron continued firmly, "The young master has two loyal subordinates at Durmstrang. And we will ensure the success of his plans. Regardless of the cost. I pledged to the young master that I will not fail him. And I have every intention of keeping my promise." At the confident declaration, Silas' eyes seemed to smile at him even as his lips murmured words of agreement. With his half-parted lips and shining eyes, Silas was the very image of attractiveness...Aleron's smile widened into a wolfish grin. He clasped his lover about the waist with a strong grasp and drew Silas closer...

Chapter Twenty Six: Hogwarts Year Five - Sorting

Harry suppressed a smirk as he strode into the Great Hall with Draco at his side. Let Dumbledore make of that what he would, he thought smugly. It was necessary, after all, for the small court that Draco had no doubt created at Hogwarts accept him as their true leader. And although it may cause a few suspicions on Dumbledore's part, it was nothing Harry couldn't handle...what concerned him more though, was the flash of emotion he had felt as he gazed upon the visage of his younger brother, who had been standing right in front of Draco. And the hatred he had felt as he spied James Potter standing in the back row, with the other teachers...taking a deep breath, he employed his Occlumency to shield his emotions – he simply could not afford them at this moment.

Following Draco, Harry took up seats at the Slytherin table, to the left of the pale blonde male. It was yet another signal, truly, as the Durmstrang and Slytherin students arranged themselves around the two – Emlen sat to his left, Draco to his right, Daphne directly across from him, in between Francis and Pansy, with Theo to the right of Draco. Of course, not all the students that he had brought with him were from the Night Serpents, hence there was a moment of confusion, but that was soon cleared up.

Then, Harry settled back to observe the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Dare he risk it? Unsure of what the consequences would be, Harry decided to plunge ahead nevertheless. Activating his special sight, Harry gazed upon the revealed aura of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, defeater of the Dark Lord Grindelwald. A bright white glow, so intense that Harry had to squint, surrounded the old man. But white was not the only colour there. No, the aura was shot through with flecks of grey, and streaks of sickly yellow. Strange. Harry had never seen that in another's aura before, though granted, his experience was rather limited. One thing he had to admit though, Dumbledore's aura was huge in its magnificence, as large as that of his father the Dark Lord. Despite his feelings towards the old man, Harry was impressed, so much that he had to fight to keep his expression blank. With an effort, he shut down his sight – any longer viewing Dumbledore's aura of Light and Harry doubted he would be able to retain control of himself.

Harry then examined the Great Hall with interest – he had been pretty impressed by the majesty of the castle so far, and he could

well understand why his father had considered Hogwarts his only home in his early years. Now, as he peered up into the starry ceiling of the Great Hall, charmed to resemble that of the sky outside, he could not help but feel a sense of fondness for the school. Hogwarts was nothing like Durmstrang – while Durmstrang had been Dark, formal and all too somber, Hogwarts had a majestic air that nevertheless did not deter the feeling of the homeliness. This, Harry decided, was a school one could love...if Harry had been given to such maudlin sentimentalities.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and – most particularly – guests," Dumbledore said, interrupting Harry's thoughts with a beaming face. "I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable." Over at the Ravenclaw table, where the Beauxbatons students had settled, Harry heard a derisive laugh emit from a boy who had a muffler wrapped around his face, a boy who had curly chocolate brown hair, from what Harry could see of him.

Fool, Harry thought. Even if he did have roughly the same sentiments with respect to Dumbledore's speech, he would never be so crass as to show it in public. "The Tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast," said Dumbledore. "For now, I would like to invite the students of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang to go through a Sorting, as part of their exchange programme!" His blue eyes twinkled merrily as a severe-looking woman wearing glasses set a patchy and ragged hat on the stool. Minevra McGonagall...and the Sorting Hat.

Harry rose to his feet with an exquisite grace that flaunted his perfect pureblood mannerisms, with a mind to rubbing it in his biological father's face, although James Potter did not know who he was...his father the Dark Lord had performed a ritual on Harry that made it extremely difficult for anyone to guess that he was Harry James Potter, or the Dark Heir, years ago. Unless Harry was really obvious about it, his identity was safe. The silver Dark Mark on his left forearm was, of course, hidden behind strong wards anchored by a blood ritual. Unless Harry wished it, it would not be visible to anyone. Not to mention that Harry had grown into a man with features strongly resembling that of his adopted father, with a shadow of James' – regal nose, high cheekbones, elegant and sharp jawline and delicate, full lips. Even his slender, yet tall, physique were a mix of James' compactness, Lily's willowy figure and the

Dark Lord's tall frame. Only his eyes, of course, were pure Lily's, and his hair, strongly James' with a hint of the Dark Lord's. All in all, it was a mixture that Harry did not expect anyone to recognize.

"As Head Boy of Durmstrang Institute, I thank the Headmaster for his kind words. We are very pleased to be here at Hogwarts, and I am sure that we will enjoy our time here. We also welcome with open arms the opportunity for close interact with our fellow Housemates from Hogwarts and Beauxbatons after the Sorting Ceremony." It was a small polite speech, one that made the other students aware of his position, and of his knowledge. As Harry strode towards the front, he was aware of the twins falling into step behind him...Aleron had persuaded him to appoint them as his bodyguards during his stay at Hogwarts, since Aleron himself could not accompany him...Harry had allowed it, not because he thought the Withers twins would be good at protecting him, though he was sure they were, but because it would enhance his status to have scions of the wealthy, pureblood family as his obvious followers.

Behind the twins, the Durmstrang students fell into single file as Harry led them to the front. Politely, he turned to McGonagall, who had in her hand, a parchment, no doubt with the names of all the Durmstrang students on it. She cleared her throat, and then, after a short mandatory speech explaining the functions of a House and the characteristics of each House to the exchange students, pronounced the first name.

"Blishwick, Korbin."

Korbin left the file and sauntered over to sit on the stool. Harry waited, and half a minute later, the Sorting Hat cried out, "Gryffindor!"

Good. Everything was going according to plan. Harry had known that they would not all be going to the same House, and he had warned them not to argue with the choices of the Sorting Hat, for he needed spies in all the Houses. And it was no surprise really, that Korbin had been sorted into the house where dwelt the brave at heart, for he was probably the only one of his roommates who still dared to crack jokes at Harry's expense and to be anything but on his best behavior around Harry. Korbin, Harry knew, would probably never lose his devil-may-care attitude.

Harry suppressed a smirk of amusement as "Greengrass, Daphne" was pronounced a Slytherin after the Sorting Hat had barely touched her head – he would have been very surprised indeed if she had been sorted into any other House. Harry wondered idly if she could be persuaded to lead the females again this year. Most of the other nineteen students he had brought with him were males, with only seven females, out of which three were from other Groups; Cerise Lavern, seventh-year, and Laetitia Bones, fifth-year of Lavender Girls and Mirabelle Whitesands, sixth-year of Ivory Horns. The prettiest and most troublesome of the lot – while Whitesands, together with her elder brother Marco, had offered a hefty bribe to Harry in the form of three very rare books, Lavern and Bones were here because they were likely to cause trouble back at Durmstrang if they weren't under his watchful eyes.

Shaking himself mentally, Harry turned back to watch as "Krum, Alexei" was sorted into Ravenclaw. With his obsession with knowledge, particularly that of Necromancy, Harry wasn't in the least surprised at the result.

Then, it was his turn. "Riddle, Harrison." McGonagall called, even as her gaze drifted to his face curiously, and her eyes narrowed slightly. Let them wonder at his surname, Harry thought smugly. His father had devised a very thorough false background for him that would stand up to the toughest of scrutiny – he was a half-blood, distantly related to the Malfoys on his deceased German mother's side, born from a half-blood Eurasian wizard father currently residing in China. That would explain his education at Durmstrang and the curious absence of letters – even owls could not travel that far. And the wizarding community in China was extremely insular and cut-off from the rest of the world; any prying Dumbledore tried to do would be in vain.

Harry placed the Sorting Hat on his head even as he shielded his mind tightly, allowing only memories that he deemed innocent outside the shields. In other word, only memories of his time at school were unprotected...he had a vague suspicion as to how the hat actually sorted students, and he would not risk something that reported to Dumbledore seeing everything. Thankfully, most of his followers who knew of his heritage were at least adept enough in Occlumency to be able to protect his secret, while the few who could not Occlude their minds (Vincent, Gregory, and even Karkaroff amongst them) had been placed under Dark Spells that prevented

Legilimency. Simply put, any attempt at Legilimency on them would fail but result in obvious suffering on their part and prolonged exposure would lead to death. Nothing could be gotten out of them.

"Interesting mind you have there...Riddle is it? I Sorted a Riddle once too. Fifty-odd years ago, if memory serves me right. Tom Marvolo Riddle. First and last Riddle I've Sorted...any relation?" A sly, smug voice manifested in Harry's mind. Harry carefully made sure that his expression was calm and his Occlumency shields tight. "Hmm, can't say I've heard of him. He might be a distant relative, I'd have to check the family tree one day." The Sorting hat chuckled in his brain. "No need, no need. Now, let's take a look at you shall we? I must say, first time I've sorted so many students who aren't first years...yes, rather interesting mind indeed...oh my, you're courageous indeed, a certain reckless disregard for your own safety under some situations...and fiercely protective of those you consider yours...but yet, not out of loyalty to them, no, rather, you think they owe you their loyalty...A thirst for knowledge, that you have indeed...already taken some of your OWLs haven't you...possible, possible...but wait, what have we here? A strong disregard for rules, you consider yourself above them, don't you...cunning...that you have in spades, not one doubt about it, not after what you did to the previous leader of your Group...ambitious, undeniable...oh yes, you would do well in - "

" SLYTHERIN!" The hat called out. Harry allowed one corner of his lip to curl into a smirk as he removed the hat and placed it back onto the stool, before he returned to his previous seat, even as the Slytherin table and the Durmstrang students burst into applause. Draco too was clapping, albeit with the restraint characteristic of a Malfoy, although his sparkling grey eyes gave away his delight. "Welcome to your rightful place in Slytherin, Harrison." Harry turned an amused smile on his friend. "Thank you, Draco. Was there ever a doubt?" Draco shook his head in suppressed merriment. "Not on my part, that's for sure. Although Theo now owes me ten Galleons." Beside Draco, Theo looked a trifle put-out, but then he gave a resigned shrug. Catching Harry's eyes, Theo explained, "I thought you'd be in Ravenclaw, considering your grades and all...This is the last time I'm betting with a Malfoy."

Harry shook his head at the antics of his friends, then turned his attention back to the sorting. The elder Stockmann sister was sorted into Slytherin while her younger sibling, Wenda, went to Ravenclaw,

as Harry expected. It was hard, after all, to picture the vixen-like Steffi in anywhere but Slytherin, and the bookish Wenda anywhere but Ravenclaw...despite the two being siblings, they were as alike as day and night. However, both of the cousins Francis and Emlen ended up in Slytherin, so Harry thought that perhaps family did count for something too...

Severus Snape watched with a frown on his face as the Durmstrang students were Sorted. He had been intrigued when the Head Boy, Harrison Maximus Riddle, had given that smooth speech, as well as slightly wary. For some reason Severus could not fathom, the boy just sparked off warning vibes in the Potions master. Something about his confident air, his manner of speaking...and perhaps his looks...or maybe it was just his blasted surname that put Severus on edge. The Dark Lord's Muggle surname...was it really a simple coincidence? And to think that the boy had been sorted into Slytherin!

Yet Severus soon found himself distracted as Minerva called out "Zedar, Emlen." With caustic eyes, Severus noted that the boy who stepped out to try on the Sorting hat, though sharing the same auburn hair and blue eyes as the third boy he had tutored for three summers, was in no way the same boy. For one, the planes of this Zedar's face was too soft, his expression too jovial and he was slightly too muscular to be that annoying boy that Severus had faced the past few summers save the last. So unless something had happened that had caused Zedar to change so drastically in the past one year odd that Severus had not seen him, there was something afoot. And Severus, sensing a secret, was determined to get to the bottom of the matter. Eight out of the twenty Durmstrang students had been sorted into his house. No doubt he would have plenty of opportunities to ferret out the truth.

Hence, it was with an absent air that Severus watched the subsequent sorting of the Beauxbatons students, most of whom ended up in Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor, save for three girls whom the hat wavered over for pretty long. Good. Severus sneered. It would be an irritant if as many of the Beauxbatons got sorted into Slytherin as Durmstrang students...Severus strongly disliked the idea of having exchange students in his so very insular House. Well, if they put even one toe out of line...the new students would soon know what having Severus Snape as their Head of House meant.

During the feast, which consisted of a large number of interesting food objects that Harry took the opportunity to try, Harry kept his eye on the staff table unobtrusively. The half-giant games keeper, Hagrid, was digging into his food with gusto, even as Severus Snape, seated two seats away from him, eyed the students with glittering eyes. Two professors whom he would have to keep an eye on...Harry had no doubt that the Potions master had realized that his erstwhile student was not Emlen Zedar. Perhaps he would choose a good time to reveal himself, and enjoy the shock on the Potions master's face.

Allowing his eyes to travel further along the staff table, Harry matched names to the faces easily enough. Dumpy, cheerful looking woman. Sprout, Herbology professor. Extremely short man. Flitwick, Charms professor. Thick glasses, gauzy shawl-wearing woman. Trelawny, Divination professor. And so it went, on and on, until Harry's eyes fell on a man with a face covered with scars, and a chunk of his nose missing. Dark grey, grizzled hair, with a spinning magical eye. Mad-eye Moody, ex-Auror, crazy Defence Against Dark Arts professor. Oh yes, another person to be wary of. Harry had no doubt that if his identity were known, Moody would be the first one attempting to capture him.

Then, Harry allowed his eyes to drift over to the one person he had resolutely refused to notice all evening – his biological father. By the looks of it, James Potter was cheerfully regaling the ex-Auror with some joke or another, if the disgruntled look on Moody's face was any indication. The years had treated him well, Harry noted bitterly, as he took in James Potter's windswept hair, unlined face and muscular body. He looked to be barely in his thirties, and not pushing his forties. Resentment filled Harry as he contemplated this; somehow, it did not seem right to Harry that his biological father should so enjoy his elder son's absence from his life. And when Harry allowed his eyes to drift casually over to the Gryffindor table, he noted that his younger brother, Martin Charlus Potter, was laughing away with his compatriots without a care in the world. A roundish face which still had not fully lost its baby-fat, auburn hair that Harry knew was a blend of James' dark hair and Lily's brilliant red one, and those deep hazel eyes, the shape of which was identical to Harry's, inherited from their mother. Tall for his age, albeit not of the same height as Weasley, who was sitting across from him, and with a strong frame that hinted at a muscular body.

Understandable, considering that Draco had informed him that Martin was a Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. All in all, Martin seemed to be the product of one who had a pampered and happy childhood. A childhood which James Potter had refused Harry. Bitter resentment and anger filled Harry, emotions so thick, strong and lingering that Harry had to tear his eyes away from them before using Occlumency to bury those emotions away temporarily.

And not a moment too soon, for as the last of the food vanished from the table, Albus Dumbledore stood up to speak.

"The moment has come," said Dumbledore, who smiled at the sea of upturned faces. Disgusting really, the adoration that the students show for him. Even discredited, his influence over his students has not waned, Harry noted. "The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket. Firstly, allow me to introduce, for those who not know them, Mr Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department for Magical Games and Sports and Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Co-operation." As applause filled the Great Hall, Harry allowed his lips to curl into a smile. Yes, that was Bartemius Crouch all right, although Dumbledore did not know just which Bartemius Crouch it was. Since Barty had been freed from his father's 'care', the elder Crouch had been placed under the Imperius. With a judicious use of Polyjuice potion, Barty Crouch Jr. often took his father's place at important events which called for full command of one's mental faculty. And since Dumbledore would easily detect an Imperiused Crouch Sr. , Barty had no doubt replaced his father this evening.

"Mr Bagman and Mr Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament," Dumbledore continued, "and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime on the panel which will judge the champions' efforts." Then, he indicated for the caretaker, whom Harry knew was called Argus Filch, to carry in a great wooden chest encrusted for jewels.

"There will be three tasks, which has been examined by Mr Crouch and Mr Bagman, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways...magical prowess, daring, powers of deduction – and, of course, their ability to cope with danger." At this, silence filled the Great Hall, even as Harry felt

a thrill of anticipation creep down his spine. To push himself to his very limits, yes, this was something that Harry had always enjoyed, and the Triwizard Tournament offered just that. It was unfortunate that his father refused to allow him to participate, really...

"Three champions will compete in the Tournament, one from each participating school. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector...the Goblet of Fire." Harry watched closely as Dumbledore took out his wand and tapped three times on the top of the casket, before withdrawing a large, roughly hewn wooden cup filled to the brim with dancing, blue-white flames. Activating his special sight, Harry noted that there was a brilliant glow around the cup – ancient and powerful anti-cheating wards that served to ensure impartiality. There was also one rather unique one of semi-permeability, which made sense when Dumbledore spoke his next words.

"Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly on a piece of parchment and drop it into the Globet." Dumbledore said. Ah, that explained it. The Goblet would only allow people to submit their own names and no one's else. Which made sense, for Harry knew there would be a number of ways for not-so-honest students to misuse such an object which created a magically binding contract had that ward not been in place. "Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, on the last day of September, the Goblet will return the names of the three it judged most worthy to represent their schools. It will be placed in the Entrance Hall tonight where it will be freely accessible to all wishing to compete."

Dumbledore's eyes then twinkled as he continued. "To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation, I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire. None under the age of seventeen will be able to cross the line." When that was mentioned, some Slytherin students stole side-long glances at the Durmstrang students, for they had brought many fifth-years with them, fifth-years who would certainly not be able to compete. Some smart ones, like Theo, had already calculated that Durmstrang only had about ten potential candidates; only all the seventh-years and slightly more than half of the sixth-years were of age. They wondered at what the Highmaster

was thinking, before deciding that it was likely the decision of the Dark Prince.

"Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this Tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the Tournament through to the end. The placing of our name in the Goblet constitutes a binding magical contract..." As Dumbledore droned on in the same vein, Harry tuned him out. Anyone foolish enough to think otherwise deserved whatever fate awaited them. He turned to engage Draco in light conversation, only to find Draco looking at him thoughtfully. "It's such a pity, isn't it, Harrison? About the Age Line, that is. I think that Champions should be chosen based on their merits, and not limited by age." Around him, a few students were nodding in agreement.

Harry allowed a small smirk to be seen before he regained his neutral blank mask. "I'm sure that Headmaster Dumbledore has his rationale. Regardless of who the Champions are, I am certain that it will be an exciting Tournament." With a gleam in his eye, Draco inclined his head before saying, just as Dumbledore ended his speech, "Please allow me to show you the Slytherin dorms, Harrison."

As Harry rose from the table, instantly, Septimus and Octavius flanked him. Apparently, they took their jobs rather seriously...Harry wondered what Aleron had said to them. The Durmstrang students all fell into formation behind Harry, as did the Slytherin fifth-years behind Draco, as the two leaders left the Great Hall, leaving many stunned students with gaping jaws in their wake.

Severus' frown deepened when he saw his godson leave the hall with the Durmstrang Head Boy. The discipline with which the Durmstrang students had fallen into line...it surpassed even that of the Slytherin fifth-years. Many students in his House had ties to the Death Eaters, of that Severus, more than anyone else, understood. Was the show of solidarity between Draco and the Riddle boy a hint at ties of the same nature between the Riddle boy and the Death Eaters? Or was Draco just doing this for some possible political or business advantage he could gain for his father? Severus resolved to find out.

Slytherin common room. Located in the dungeons, beneath the school and even the lake, according to Draco, it had a grand and cold atmosphere to it. Dark green and black leather low-backed sofas were spread out in clusters throughout the common room, on cold marble flooring and amidst elaborately carved pillars and walls. It was a good place to conduct business, Harry thought, even as he noted the greenish lights cast by the lamps. "Rather cosy, isn't it?" Harry raised a sardonic eyebrow at Draco. Draco shrugged slightly. "Appearances are important. If it makes you feel better, we have smaller, private rooms just off the dormitory rooms for studying. It's three students to one dormitory room for us, which is better than the others; I hear they share one room amongst five students."

Draco then led them to their dormitory rooms – Harry would be sharing with the Withers twins, and Emlen and Francis with Claus Schneider. It was an arrangement Harry had come up with after a request from Septimus. "My prince, please allow us the honour of sharing a room with you. It would be conducive for our roles as your bodyguard. We promise that our presence will not disturb you in anyway. Please." Harry had raised an eyebrow at that. The twins appeared to take their tasks as bodyguards very seriously.

Not that they were too good at it, Harry mused. Later that night, it was easy for Harry to cast sleeping charms on the two to ensure that they would not wake, even as he stalked out of his dormitory room quietly, though not before he allowed Nuit out of his trunk to explore the castle and grounds as he would, provided that he stay out of sight.

When Harry reached the entrance of the Slytherin common room, he activated his special sight. He had a hunch that Snape, as Head of Slytherin House, would not allow his students to go wandering around the castle at night without him being aware of it. And yep, Harry was right. The brown and gold lines of wards and inter-woven alarms formed a web around the entrance. Studying the wards, Harry could see that they were time-activated, probably set to work right after curfew. Yet what surprised Harry the most was that the wards appeared keyed to individual signatures too. That meant that not only would Snape be aware of any errant students, he would know who exactly snuck out. Who knew that the greasy git would be such a deft hand at warding? Luckily for Harry, the Durmstrang students had yet to be added to the web, so if Harry were to leave,

Snape would only know that someone had left the common room. Of course, by process of elimination, he would easily guess that it was a non-Hogwarts student who did so.

Smirking, Harry set about tweaking the wards. By now, his ability and talent at Wards surpassed the Potions Master's, so Harry found it easy enough to delicately remove the alarms in the web. Unfortunately, Snape would be suspicious if he was suddenly not alerted to any nocturnal outings on the part of his Slytherins, so after careful consideration, Harry had rearranged the web such that it would only work for first to fourth year Slytherins. He did so with a subtlety that even should Snape check on the web, a cursory examination would not reveal any changes. After that, Harry tied the web to his own magical signature, so that unless he gave permission, the web would not register any new individual signatures. Lastly, Harry blended his magical signature into the strands of the web itself, so that Snape would not be able to find it even if he were looking at it.

His task done, Harry left the Slytherin common room with a satisfied air.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Hogwarts Year Five - Revelation

The next morning, Harry forced himself awake at 6am in order to prepare for a meeting. Karkaroff had asked him, prior to arriving at Hogwarts that on the first day, if Harry wanted to sit in on a meeting between himself and Dumbledore, a meeting to discuss the rules that the Durmstrang exchange students would be bound by. Wishing to add in some conditions of his own, Harry had readily agreed.

After his usual morning run, which Harry took around the Lake, Harry went back to the room to note that the Withers twins had finally awakened. Well, it was not their fault, since it was Harry who had cast the Sleeping Charm on them, but Harry found it amusing that the two who claimed to be his bodyguards did not even notice his absence. Not that morning, and not the previous night either.

A quick shower in the toilet attached to his dormitory room soon took care of any lingering tiredness that Harry might have felt due to his mere four hours of sleep – his activities last night had taken longer than he had expected. Nevertheless, Harry was used to surviving on low sleep, due in part to the many raids he had participated in over the past few years. Raids were, after all, conducted at night, taking up his precious sleep time. And since his father expected him up at the same time every morning regardless...

Harry dressed in his blood-red Durmstrang robes and pinned his Head Boy badge on, just above where his Group symbol would normally be. For the duration of this exchange programme, the Group markings on the uniforms had been removed; Harry had wanted to encourage school unity, which he felt was easier if there were no overt signs of the Durmstrang students' affiliations. It was not as if it would have any great impact – after the choosing of the champions tonight, all the exchange students would be wearing Hogwarts robes and uniforms for the duration of the school year, save for special occasions.

Sunrise found Harry and the Withers twins in front of the Headmaster's office – Harry had made sure to get directions from Draco the previous night. Glancing at the twins, Harry wondered how long it would take for them to get bored of their new jobs and to leave him alone. While bodyguards added to Harry's status, the constant presence of two others irked him slightly.

Harry passed a few minutes of his time by studying the gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's office – it was large and ugly, and seemed to be glaring at him. Before he could utilize his special sight to observe the gargoyle however, Karkaroff had already arrived.

"Ah, good morning Mr. Riddle, punctual as usual I see. Shall we head up to the Headmaster's office then?" Karkaroff's oily voice was rather unctuous as he greeted Harry. Harry graced the Highmaster with a cool smile. "Of course, Highmaster. Lead the way." Harry saw Karkaroff glance at the Withers twins before dismissing them from his mind and speaking a password of sorts to the gargoyles. "Ice Mice". The gargoyle slid aside and Harry followed the Highmaster up the windy staircase.

Before Karkaroff could knock on the office door however, a voice called out from beyond. "Come in, Highmaster Karkaroff." An identification spell of sorts? Harry mused even as he followed the Highmaster into the office. Harry found himself in a large circular room with many windows and many portraits of people whom he knew were old headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts – his father had told him as much. Delicate silver instruments sat on spindly tables around the room, even as Harry's eyes were drawn to the books on the wall of bookshelves taking up half of the wall space.

One thing though, that Harry did not expect; on a perch in the Headmaster's office sat a phoenix, covered in bright red plumage that faded to brilliant gold down the length of its wings and tail. Activating his sight, Harry saw that it possessed a luminous aura of crimson and bronze limbed in gold and white fire that was painful to look upon – he immediately shut down his sight. Upon taking one look at Harry, the phoenix broke into a melodious song that somehow tugged at his heart and conscience; at the same time, agony seemed to lance through his scar and the Mark on his left forearm into his magical core. The Phoenix's Lament, a rational part of Harry thought, even as the rest of him was consumed by the trilling of the bird. Harry knew that Phoenixes were considered Light creatures – he should have known that he'd be adversely affected by the presence of one, especially since he had delved into some of the darkest of the Dark Arts.

Nevertheless, Harry ensured that his facial expressions revealed not the slightest hint of his pain to the Phoenix's owner, currently seated behind the desk. He could do nothing however, about the way

Karkaroff hissed in pain and clasped at his left forearm. Really, if the man could not even stand that small amount of pain, it was no wonder his father had an extremely low opinion of the Highmaster.

The song stopped as abruptly as it had begun, even as Harry met the eyes of one Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts and leader of the Order of the Phoenix. He made sure that his Occlumency shields were solid – he was not disappointed as he soon felt a subtle probe along his mental barriers. Harry hid a mental smirk as he ensured that the only impression Dumbledore got from him was one of slight curiosity. Because of the effect the phoenix's song had on Harry, it was a weak front that would not have stood up to a deeper probe, however, it appeared that Dumbledore was satisfied with what he saw, for he withdrew his probe quickly.

Let Dumbledore make of that what he will, Harry thought smugly. He knew that Dumbledore would know he was not a Light wizard – those wizards who were so would have felt uplifted by the phoenix's song. Yet he was sure that Dumbledore did not expect a fifth-year student from Durmstrang Institute, known for its teaching of the Dark Arts, to be Light, though even Dumbledore would not guess how deeply tainted Harry actually was. Soaked in Darkness to the furthest reaches of my magical core actually...

"Good morning, Igor, Mr. Riddle. Take a seat, take a seat. Lemon Drops, anyone?" The twinkle in his blue eyes, coupled with his long, snowy white hair and beard and his eccentric dress sense (he was currently wearing a deep purple robe spangled with golden stars) seemed to portray Dumbledore as a kindly, grandfatherly old man. Yet Harry knew better. This was the man who had sent him to live with the Dursleys after his mother's death. This was the man, who had, through that one action of his, single-handedly destroyed Harry's childhood and caused six agonizing years for Harry. True, Harry blamed James Potter too. But he knew that had it not been for Dumbledore, he never would have gone to his Muggle relatives in the first place. For a moment, Harry felt like abandoning all caution to the winds, and to just attack the old fool right here, right now. Fortunately, rationality soon reasserted itself. I must be even more affected by that song than I thought. To even consider that type of foolishness...Father would have crucioed some sense into me if he knew...

"No thank you, Headmaster. I do not take sweets before breakfast." Especially not sweets offered by you, you old fool, since they're probably laced with something. Harry kept a polite smile on his face as Karkaroff and him settled into chairs opposite the Headmaster. Karkaroff, having recovered, laughed heartily, "And rightly so, Mr. Riddle. It's good to see youngsters today taking care of themselves properly, eh, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled slightly as he nodded amicably. Karkaroff then twirled his rather sparse beard with one finger as he continued, "Now, Headmaster, we don't wish to take up too much of your time, so let's be about our business eh? With regards to my students' code of conduct while they're at Hogwarts, they'll of course be happy to follow the same school rules as the Hogwarts students. Won't they, Mr. Riddle?"

Harry smiled pleasantly as he inclined his head slightly, "But of course, Highmaster. As guests, it would only be respectful for us to follow our hosts' rules. However, in the interests of my fellow students, it might perhaps be prudent if any punishments are to be vetted by our Highmaster beforehand, as it is ultimately Highmaster Karkaroff who is responsible for the well-being of the students of Durmstrang Institute." A flash of surprise crossed Karkaroff's face, which he quickly turned into a look of approval.

"You're quite right, Mr. Riddle. What do you say, Albus?" Knowing that Karkaroff would never dare oppose him, Harry spent his time observing Dumbledore intently, noting how his fingers twiddled themselves before he replied, "Ah, but that would defeat the purpose of the Sorting, my boy. The winning and, inadvertently, losing of the House points is what bonds the students of one House together." Harry had to suppress a tendril of irritation at the way the Headmaster addressed him. He pretended to consider this for a moment, before replying, "You have a point, Headmaster. Shall we have a compromise then? The deduction and addition of House points will be up to the discretion of the Hogwarts professor, however, all detentions will be assigned by the Highmaster personally. Hogwarts professors may suggest detentions, however, it is at the discretion of the Highmaster as to whether there will be any detention assigned, and to the type of detention assigned."

"An excellent suggestion, Mr. Riddle." Karkaroff injected at this point. Dumbledore frowned slightly for a moment, before reluctantly

agreeing. Harry allowed the corner of his lips to twitch upwards as he contemplated the victory; House points did not really matter to him, however, with Karkaroff keeping detentions off the Durmstrang students, there would be a lot his fellow schoolmates and him could get away with this year.

The meeting then turned to other topics, like accommodations and lessons. It was confirmed that the students would be sleeping in their respective House's dormitories, even though the Durmstrang ship would be available for gatherings. Students would take whatever lesson they would have taken had they been in Durmstrang, save those subjects which Hogwarts did not offer, which they had an option of completing via a correspondence course or suspending their studies in that particular subject for a year. Here, Harry insisted that students should also be allowed to take new subjects at Hogwarts, at a level which they could manage, something which Karkaroff hurriedly and Dumbledore bemusedly agreed to.

No doubt the latter thought that Harry was currently acting like a Ravenclaw, however, Harry knew full well the advantage of appearing to excel in a subject – and then offering his help to those weaker in that subject. From Harry's point of view, the more the merrier.

So it was with a pleased smirk that Harry finally emerged from the Headmaster's office, Karkaroff in tow. With Karkaroff's backing, Dumbledore had agreed to more of Harry's proposals than expected...Harry raised an eyebrow at the sight of Septimus and Octavius still lounging by the spot where he had left them. As he walked towards them, both straightened and inclined their heads slightly. "My prince, Headmaster" they murmured. As they grew older, both twins had slowly grown into taciturn, mature individuals. Never very friendly with Harry to begin with, it appeared that they seemed to have fallen into the roles of subordinates easily.

Ten minutes later, Harry was seated at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall with Draco by his side, and Daphne by his other side. Spearing a neatly sliced piece of sausage on his fork, Harry listened as Daphne and Pansy, who was sitting opposite her, recounted the tale of how Weasley and Potter had taken Aging Potions and tried to get past Dumbledore's Age Line at the Entrance Hall before breakfast, only to sprout long white beards. Draco sneered at the

Gryffindors' antics. "Gryffindorks. As if Dumbledore wouldn't have thought of that..." Harry shook his head in disdain, slightly surprised that the two were naïve enough to think that that would work. "Too true, Draco. The simplest solution is not always the correct one." Draco caught Harry's eyes, then tilted his head in a suspicious, yet thoughtful, manner. "What solution would you recommend then, Harrison?" Harry allowed a mysterious smile to play about his lips, but did not reply.

After Harry had finished his breakfast, he ordered Emlen, Francis and the Withers twins to distribute timetables to all the Durmstrang students in the hall – it was a good opportunity for them to interact with the students in other houses, just in case there was anything urgent, yet secret, that had to be communicated to Harry.

After breakfast, Harry and Draco, together with the other fifth year Slytherins, headed for the dungeons. The first lesson of the day was Potions with the Gryffindors. Harry allowed himself a small smirk; he looked forward to his time in Snape's class. Perhaps he could have some fun at the latter's expense once more...

Severus Snape strode into his classroom with his usual sneer on his face. Fifth-year Potions with the Slytherins and Gryffindors...that meant dealing with the insufferable idiot Longbottom and his penchant for blowing up his cauldron. Although that did mean that he'd have plenty of excuses to take points off the Gryffindors. And of course, give points to his own House in the process – as competent as Draco was in his class, that would not be a problem.

Yet, when Severus looked at the students assembled in the dark, dingy dungeon, he froze for a moment at the upset class dynamics. Usually, Draco sat in the front row on the Slytherin side of the room along with his partner Theodore, and another pair, Zabini and Parkinson. Today however, Draco was partnered with a raven-haired, emerald-eyed boy – Harrison Riddle, Head Boy of Durmstrang. And that was not the only change. Parkinson was paired with Greengrass' elder daughter – a golden-haired girl with doll-like features, and taking Vincent and Gregory's usual places behind Draco were another pair of students with a slight familial resemblance; one had auburn hair and blue eyes while the other had chestnut brown hair and the same blue eyes. The auburn-haired Emlen Zedar – the boy whose doppelganger he had been teaching for three summers.

Extremely curious and suspicious, Severus Snape gave in to temptation – he caught Zedar's eyes and attempted Legilimency. A small brush, no more, in order to determine if Zedar's thoughts hinted at anything strange. To his consternation, Severus found himself come up against a rather solid stone barrier in Zedar's mind – apparently, the Durmstrang boy knew Occlumency. Severus bit back a curse. He should have known, really. Even some of his own Slytherins knew Occlumency. Most students from Durmstrang were pure-bloods, who, paranoid about allowing free access to Legilimens their various black-mail-able material and political maneuverings, were always quick to teach the mind arts to their scions.

Of course, Severus prided himself on being one of the best Occlumens ever. Even Dumbledore and the Dark Lord were unable to breach his shields without a concerted attack that would leave him insane. Unfortunately, his Legilimency was not as proficient. He gave a quick glance at Zedar – from the boy's expression, he had no clue as to what Severus had been doing. Satisfied, Severus decided to start his class...only to freeze at the small smirk on Riddle's face. Riddle met Severus' eyes for an inestimable moment, with a small glint in his emerald eyes, eyes that somehow evoked a sense of familiarity in Severus. A moment later, the smirk was gone, as if it had never been there before. Riddle then politely inclined his head to Severus. How...? Does he know I tried to use Legilimency on Zedar?

Putting the issue aside for the moment, Severus then decided to give a speech to welcome the guests in his class...with his usual snark and sarcasm of course. He ended with a wave of his wand, putting up the instructions on making the Draught of Peace on the board, and told the students to get started on their individual potions – no pair work today.

Then, as was his wont, he strode around the Gryffindor section of the classroom to intimidate the students, all the while keeping an eye on Riddle and his partner. He noted with some surprise that it was Draco who went to collect ingredients from the store cupboard (Draco usually disdained such menial tasks). Severus kept an eye on the pair even as he sneered at Longbottom's trembling hands as he added what looked like a dozen drops of hellebore syrup to his cauldron, instead of the requisite two (Severus noted that Riddle had precisely measured two drops into his cauldron with quick, efficient

movements). Longbottom gave a tremendous start when he passed his cauldron, giving him terrified glances. Severus suppressed a smirk. It was funny really, how he could still intimidate the idiotic boy after five years in his presence.

As Severus strode past Granger's table, he ignored the girl, noting that her potion was, at least, doing exactly what it was supposed to do. "Weasley!" He barked. "What do you call those?" The youngest son of Molly's brood glared at him sullenly before muttering resentfully. "Skinned Valerian roots." Severus eyed the roughly hewn, uneven slices of roots, still complete with huge bits of skin attached. Silently, he murmured, "You call these skinned, Weasley? *Evanesco*." Hearing Weasley's splutter of protest, he idly called out, "Five points from Gryffindor", even as he strolled towards the Slytherin side of the classroom.

Severus stared at Riddle's potion – it was in the same state as Granger's, near perfection. Not as good as Draco's perhaps, but then, his godson did have a flair for Potions. Yet, there was something about the way Riddle prepared his ingredients – the precise, methodical method with which he chopped up the Valerian root, the deft application of pressure to the porcupine quills, causing them to disintegrate into powder: most students used the pestle, yet Riddle chopped them up neatly first before grounding them into fine powder form. Then the way with which he added the ingredients, with gentleness that belied the rapid movements of his hand – it was eerily reminiscent of one particular student Severus had had the misfortune to teach...

"Zedgar!" Severus snarled softly, even as he watched the boy's reaction carefully. The boy did not look up, no, he continued calmly adding his porcupine quills...but his reaction was too calm, too controlled. Even Draco had glanced up at the strange tone with which Severus had called Zedgar's name. And the real Emlen Zedgar, well, he was looking at Severus with a question on his face. "Sir?"

Severus spat out some comment about the real Zedgar's potion, keeping his attention on Riddle. He was not disappointed. After the class had gone back to their potions, Riddle lifted his head slowly, elegantly, and met Severus' eyes with a mocking smile on his lips. He knows that I know. No, it's more like he wants me to know. And he's toying with me again...Severus thought viciously. Unfortunately, Severus could not say anything to the boy about the revelation at

that moment; it would raise too many questions. He turned his back on Riddle and made his way to the front of the class.

"A light silver vapour should now be rising from your potion," Severus snarled out. Ten minutes later, he ordered the class to fill one labelled flagon with their potion and to leave it on his desk for grading. One by one, students left their potions on his desk. As Riddle placed his flagon on Severus' desk, a small smirk was upon the boy's lips, almost unnoticeable by any save one who was looking at it. As Riddle walked back to his seat, seeing Riddle's near-perfect potion on his desk, Severus could not help but feel an irrational surge of anger. His lips curled as he allowed his hand to slip just so...

...Only to hear the dull thud of a whole flagon hitting the floor. Greengrass, who had just placed her own flagon on his desk, bent and picked it up. Smiling sweetly, she said politely, "Here, sir, your hand must have slipped. It is fortunate, is it not, that our Head Boy places Unbreakable Charms on all his equipment?" She placed Riddle's flagon back on his desk with an innocent, sugary smile that Severus recognized as one as dangerous as his snarls. "Thank you, Miss Greengrass." Severus forced out. It wouldn't do for her to complain to her father about his behavior towards her; it would raise undue suspicions about his loyalty. Severus had always been careful to show overt favouritism towards his own Slytherins, especially the children of his fellow Death Eaters, because he did not wish for any more questions to be raised about his loyalty.

As the bell rang and Severus dismissed the class, he called out, "Riddle, please stay behind for a few moments."

As the class filed out, Harry waited patiently at his work station. Draco had given him a questioning glance, but Harry had gestured for him to go on ahead. But if Harry knew his friend, no doubt the entire Slytherin cohort, Hogwarts and Durmstrang both (for there were no Beauxbaton fifth-year students) was currently waiting for him outside the Potions classroom.

Well. Harry would just have to deal with Snape quickly then. The man had acted as Harry had expected – the Legilimency attack on Emlen, which Harry had been looking out for, the noticing of his usual Potions ingredients preparation habit, which Harry had deliberately emphasized, and the bristling at the smirks he had sent

the Potions master. All of which had culminated in this final confrontation. He stood up and made his way over to the Potions master's desk.

"Is anything the matter, Professor?" His tone respectful, Harry queried with a bland expression on his face. Snape was glaring at him with irritation in his gaze. "Is there something you want to tell me...Zedar?" The Potions master attempt at making his voice silky was not working, mainly because of the fact that Harry, trained by the very best, could pick out the threads of anger in his voice. For a moment, Harry wondered if he should at least try to make the man an ally, for having the Potions master at his side would be an asset indeed, for his plans this year.

But no. Snape was already suspicious of Harry. Trying to make him an ally was a project on which Harry would have to spend a lot of time, time which Harry had other plans for. Besides, the Potions master was too intelligent by far – the more the time spent with him, the more likely it would be that Snape would figure out his true identity. After all, according to his father, Snape had been infatuated with Lily at one point in time, even going as far as to plead for her life. And with his physical resemblance to Lily, however slight it was, and even with all the rituals, it was best that Harry keep a distance.

Besides, Harry absolutely refused to cozy up to the traitor for an entire year. Privately, Harry thought that his father's suspicions were more than that; that Snape was a double-agent firmly entrenched on the Light side. Were it not for his usefulness, Harry would delight in ending the man's life – Snape ranked only slightly lower than Wormtail in his list of "Despicable Wizards Who Should Die Horribly", which Dumbledore topped.

Harry made sure however, to keep his face in a pleasant mask as he replied, "Professor, my name is Riddle. Harrison Riddle. If it is Zedar you want, I could call him here for you." Snape loomed over Harry like an overgrown bat, an ugly expression on his face. Sneering, he said, "Stop with the games. Zedar, I know you know that I know who you are."

For a fleeting second, Harry considered denying it till the end, just to see the entertaining sight of Snape getting even more worked up, but that would only make the man more suspicious. Raising an eyebrow, Harry replied coolly, "I will assume, barring any specific

accusations, that you're referring to my presence at the Malfoy Manor as Zedar?"

Snape seemed to regain control of his temper. His voice was soft and silky as he replied, "So you don't deny it then." Harry allowed a small smirk to cross his lips, even as he waved a hand airily. "Of course not, Professor. There is no need for me to deny such a trifling matter. It was merely a small, harmless joke on the part of three young children after all. I am of course ready to tender a full apology if you feel aggrieved at the prank, sir."

And with that answer, Harry had effectively trapped Snape between a rock and the hard place. If Snape insisted on a formal apology, with the full pure-blood etiquette, he would have to admit to being taken in by three children – for three consecutive summers no less, which would make him out to be quite like a fool. And if Snape let it go, well, his ire would not be soothed, and he would have effectively been out-maneuvered by a fifteen-year-old teenager.

At length, Snape, who looked ready to have an apoplectic fit, spat out, "Get out of my sight, Riddle." Harry inclined his head slightly, and then left with a smirk plastered firmly on his face. It was just so entertaining, the way he could make the usually collected Snape lose his temper.

Once Harry exited from the classroom, his estimation of Draco's actions proved to be correct – the entire Slytherin fifth-year cohort, Durmstrang students and all, stood waiting patiently outside. "Harrison," Draco greeted with his customary smirk on his face. "Shall we head to Herbology then?" Harry inclined his head slightly as Draco fell into step beside him and the rest of the Slytherins formed ranks behind them. Emlen fell in by his other side, a grin on his face, even as he asked the question all the Slytherins were dying to ask. "So, my prince, pray tell: what in Merlin's name did you do to the potions professor?"

Aware that all the Slytherins near him were hanging on to his every word, Harry allowed the smirk on his face to widen even as he answered casually, "Well Emlen, if you're interested, allow me to regale you with a tale of how three young children got the better of a Potions master..." By the end of the tale, told with the aid of Draco and Theo, all the Durmstrang and Hogwarts Slytherin students had appreciative smirks on their faces.

Daphne maintained the aloof pureblood mask that she usually kept in the presence of strangers, but her eyes sparkled brightly when she heard the conclusion of the tale. "Masterfully played, Harrison. You've managed to put that horrid man in his place!" She whispered softly. Harry acknowledged the compliment with a small heartfelt smile. He was quite touched actually, at Daphne's subtle confrontation with Snape during Potions class. For that was what it had been for Daphne, pureblood lady that she was – the subtle hints of poison beneath her sweet smile was as much of a weapon as his own pointed verbal barbs and traps beneath his polite mask, a weapon which she had utilized in defense of Harry. Perhaps Daphne was growing up after all...Intrigued by what he saw, Harry decided to partner with his only close female friend during Herbology.

Later that night, Harry was seated at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall with the rest of his House-mates. Lessons that day had been similar to those back at Durmstrang – despite the lateness of his entire house, Sprout had readily fallen to his charm when he had explained that Professor Snape had kept them behind (Harry knew that Snape would corroborate his story, as the man would not want to cause a situation where large amounts of points would be deducted from Slytherin). Thereafter, he had impressed the Herbology professor with his earnest questions and comprehensive answers, even as he had taken the opportunity to hold a lengthy conversation with Daphne under the Muffliato charm.

Harry had adopted yet another attitude when it came to History of Magic. Not seeing the point in charming a ghost, he had thoroughly ignored Professor Binns while holding court at the back of the classroom with his Slytherins, after setting up a Dicta-quill to copy down whatever Binns was saying, and casting a strong, modified Notice-me-not charm and privacy ward on his House-mates, so that they could see and hear each other but neither the professor nor the Gryffindors would notice anything untoward. It had been quite a productive session, as the Slytherins exchanged the latest information with each other. Harry however, was more interested in the dynamics of the Hogwarts Slytherins. He noticed that while they did defer to Draco a lot, some of them had started to defer to him, over and above Draco – and not only those who knew of his status either. Harry also noticed that Draco did not seem to be too happy about that ...

Setting aside those issues to be dealt with at a later date, Harry turned his attention to what was happening in the Great Hall. The Goblet of Fire had been moved; it was not standing in front of Dumbledore's empty chair at the teachers' table. Around the Hall, many students were constantly craning their necks to look at the Goblet, and wore impatient expressions on their faces. Even when food appeared on the tables on golden plates in front of them, Harry observed that the students from other houses did not pay much attention to what they were eating.

Not the Slytherins though. They knew better than to show such outward signs of enthusiasm, especially with the Dark Prince seated amidst them. With proper decorum, polite conversation took place as they partook of their dinner, on topics from academics to politics. None mentioned the Goblet of Fire or started speculating about who the champions might be, although Harry knew that many of them had placed bets on the identity of the champions.

At long last, the golden plates were cleared and Dumbledore got to his feet. "Well, the Goblet is almost ready to make its decision," said Dumbledore cheerfully. He gave further instructions for the champions to proceed into the door behind the staff table when their names were called, before taking out his wand and giving a great sweeping wave with it – at once, most of the candles were extinguished, leaving the Great Hall in a state of semi-darkness. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole hall, the sparkling bright bluey-whiteness of the flames almost painful on the eyes...

The flames inside the Goblet suddenly turned red. Sparks flew from it, then, the next moment, a tongue of flame shot into the air and a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it...

While I hope it won't take another six weeks until my next update, I don't see my work load decreasing anytime soon. So please do bear with me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Hogwarts Year Five – Champions

As the charred piece of parchment fluttered out, the whole room gasped. Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm's length, peering down his crooked nose at the paper. "The champion for Beauxbatons will be," He read in a strong, clear voice, "Alain Fitzroy." A slender boy with curly chocolate brown hair seated at Gryffindor got swiftly to his feet and swept up between the Gryffindor and Slytherin table. Harry recognized the boy as the one who had emitted derisive laughter the previous night.

Fitzroy huh? Harry's brain was whirring as he reviewed the information that he knew about the boy. His father had provided him with a list of potential candidates and some background information on them, so that he could better play his game of intrigue this year. Fitzroy had been something of a dark horse, actually. The son of a father from an ancient French Wizarding house and a Mudblood mother from French nobility, Fitzroy was a half-blood wizard with above-average grades in school. And a Gryffindor, apparently. Was he as reckless and foolishly brave as those of his House were wont to be? Yet, Harry knew that the Sorting Hat wasn't all-powerful. After all, if he could use Occlumency to keep the hat out of all but a few carefully chosen memories, Fitzroy could possibly have done the same. And even if he was truly a Gryffindor, Harry would not underestimate anyone selected as a Champion.

As the clapping and chatting died down, everyone's attention was focused once again on the Goblet, which, seconds later, turned red once more. A second piece of parchment shot out of the Goblet... "The champion for Hogwarts," said Dumbledore, "is Cedric Diggory!" Harry looked around, amused, as both Draco and Theo wore disgruntled expressions on their faces. Or well, as close to disgruntlement as they would allow themselves to show in public anyhow. The entire Hall however, full of Hogwarts students, was clapping madly for their champion. The Hufflepuff table had leapt to their feet and were currently cheering and applauding loudly. Even some students in Slytherin were clapping, though of course, their applause was far more muted.

Harry clapped politely with the rest as the handsome brown-haired grey-eyed boy made his way towards the front of the hall. Cedric Diggory. Pure-blood son of Amos Diggory, a mediocre wizard who works Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical

Creatures at the Ministry of Magic. Hufflepuff Prefect, Captain and Seeker of Hufflepuff Quidditch team. Good grades. Quite the over-achiever, actually...To judge by the applause he was receiving, Diggory must have been quite popular amongst his school-mates.

And the Goblet of Fire turned red once more! sparks showered out of it, the tongue of flame shot high into the air, and from its tip Dumbledore pulled forth the third piece of parchment. His piercing blue eyes appeared to have lost its twinkle as he perused the name on the parchment, but after a short pause, Dumbledore cleared his throat and called out, "The Durmstrang champion," his eyes travelled to the Slytherin table, "is Harrison Riddle!"

Smoothly, gracefully, Harry rose from his seat. There was a moment of stunned silence in the Great Hall before whispers started up about Harry's age. Then, led by Draco and Emlen, the entire Slytherin table stood up and clapped loudly for Harry, even as Harry started to walk down the aisle between the Slytherin and Gryffindor tables. As he walked, he heard someone call out, "Dark Prince!" It was a cry that was soon taken up by all the Durmstrang students, regardless of which table they sat at. "Dark Prince. Dark Prince. Dark Prince!" Fool! This'll make Dumbledore even more suspicious, if he wasn't already so when he found out my surname...When I find out who started the chant...Harry allowed his eyes to take in the sight of Korbin cheering wildly at the Gryffindor table, and Alexei's more muted but no less sincere clapping at the Ravenclaw table. Scattered around the other three tables, all the Durmstrang students joined the Slytherin students in their standing ovation of Harrison Riddle, Durmstrang Champion.

Harry made sure that his face held a perfectly regal and composed smile even as he raised a hand in acknowledgement of the cheers. It was good to see the adoration that the Durmstrang students showed for him, the result of his years of effort. As he traversed the hall, he noted that the teachers all wore looks ranging from stunned surprise to gape-jawed astonishment. James Potter in particular, had a look of shock on his face – probably due to surprise that Harry had managed to get past the Age Line when his precious son could not. Dumbledore's expression however, was grave, as he studied Harry with his bright intense blue eyes.

Ignoring them all, Harry went through the door out of the Great Hall.

Martin Potter watched as the Head Boy from Durmstrang disappeared through the door. He was inwardly seething. How could Riddle manage to get past the Age Line when he, Martin Potter, could not? And to think he had even enlisted the help of two of the Marauders, Uncle Sirius and his dad, who had been delighted to help the next generation with a bit of line-crossing. He had thought that with the help of two of the greatest pranksters of all times, Ron and him would have been able to submit their names into the Goblet.

But no, Martin had ended up humiliating himself in the Entrance Hall that morning, when long white beards had sprouted from his and Ron's face. Ron had been angry at their failure, especially when Martin had all but assured him that the Aging Potion would work. And Ron's good opinion mattered a lot to Martin...Ron was like the elder brother Martin never had.

Now, watching the arrogant toerag Harrison Riddle flaunt the fact that he got past the Age Line as he walked down the Hall like he owned the place, even as memories of the way Riddle had treated Hermione and Ron at first the bookstore four years ago and then the Quidditch World Cup surfaced in his mind...well, needless to say, Martin felt like casting a few choice curses at the berk.

To judge by the murderous look on Ron's face, his friend felt far more strongly. In fact, none of the Gryffindors looked very happy at all, save of course, the few Durmstrang students sorted into that House, who were still chanting some sort of title... "Dark Prince. Dark Prince. Dark Prince." Why, the sheer arrogance of the berk! Did he really think himself a prince?

Harry found himself in a smaller room, lined with paintings of witches and wizards. A handsome fire was roaring in the fireplace opposite him. Cedric Diggory and Alain Fitzroy were grouped around the fire. Diggory was leaning against the mantelpiece, smiling politely at Fitzroy, when both looked up at Harry's entrance. To his credit, Fitzroy put two and two together quickly. He stared incredulously at Harry for a moment before exclaiming, "Zey cannot send a boy to compete!" Somehow, to Harry, Fitzroy's accented English sounded a tad exaggerated.

Harry raised an eyebrow even as Diggory started. "You're the Durmstrang champion?" Diggory blurted out in shock. Before Harry could frame a retort, there was a sound of scurrying feet behind him

and Ludo Bagman entered the room. He clapped Harry on the back heartily, saying, "Extraordinary! Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen, may I introduce the Durmstrang champion?" Diggory turned his shocked face towards Bagman even as Alain Fitzroy drew his fine eyebrows together thoughtfully.

"But zair 'as been a mistake," Fitzroy said to Bagman with a calculating gleam in his eye, " 'E cannot compete, 'e is too young." Hoping to eliminate the competition even before you begin, hmm? Definitely worth watching. Before Harry could say anything, the door behind them opened once more and a large group of people came in – Dumbledore, Karkaroff, Maxime, McGonagall, Snape and Crouch Jr. disguised as Crouch Sr. Idly, he wondered what Barty must have been thinking at the moment. No doubt the man was on the edge, since the Dark Lord had probably told him to ensure Harry's safety, an order whose fulfilment was threatened by the current situation. Catching Barty's eyes, Harry shook his head minutely, warning the older man not to interfere. He relaxed slightly when Barty acquiesced with a slight nod.

"Madame Maxime!" said Fitzroy at once, his voice suitably indignant. "Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete!" Fitzroy's acting was superb, Harry had to admit. Were it not for the gleam in his eyes and the thoughtful frown, even Harry would have bought the act. Fitzroy had apparently decided that the best way to eliminate a potential competitor from the competition would be to whine about the unfairness of the situation. Given that the Goblet of Fire would not re-ignite until the start of the next Tournament, should Harry be disqualified, Fitzroy would have one less competitor.

"What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dorr?" Maxime appeared to have taken up her champion's cause. "Zis little boy should not be competing. Ze Age Line should 'ave kept him out, Dumbly-dorr." Harry allowed emerald fire to fill his eyes at Maxime's words. Unlike Fitzroy, Maxime truly believed in that he was a mere little boy. Before Dumbledore could say anything, Harry interjected politely, "Madame Maxime, I believe that the rules do not state that champions have to be of age; it was merely a precaution that our esteemed Headmaster of Hogwarts had taken to prevent unskilled younger students from competing."

"It's no one's fault but Riddle's, Madame Maxime," said Snape softly, his black eyes alight with malice. "Don't go blaming Dumbledore for

Riddle's determination to break rules – " At this, Karkaroff, who had heretofore been silently, spoke up with a steely smile. "Now, Severus, I would thank you not to insult Durmstrang's champion." An intelligent move, Karkaroff. You know that my father will be displeased with this outcome, you're trying to make it appear that you did everything possible to protect me, aren't you? Knowing that Karkaroff had discerned from Harry's words to Maxime that Harry intended to compete in the Tournament, Harry wasn't too worried about Karkaroff interfering. Quite simply, the Highmaster would not dare to get on the wrong side of Harry even if it was in accordance with Voldemort's wishes. For while the Dark Lord had a short memory for gratitude, Harry was known to protect those who served him loyally. And with Harry's new status as Dark Prince in the Dark Lord's forces, Karkaroff knew that to cross Harry would be suicide.

"Thank you Severus. And my apologies, Igor," said Dumbledore firmly, even as he peered down his long nose and half-moon spectacles at Harry. "Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Mr. Riddle?" Dumbledore queried, even as he used Legilimency on Harry in an attempt to discern the truth. Harry met Dumbledore's gaze unflinchingly even as he created false memories of himself turning in to bed early the previous night.

"Of course not, Professor. I respect the host school's wishes that underage students not compete in the Tournament." Harry answered calmly. Snape made a soft noise of disbelief in the shadows. After the revelations of the day, he was extremely suspicious of Harry.

"Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?" asked Dumbledore. Harry raised an eyebrow at that irrelevant question. "No, Professor."

"Ah, but of course 'e is lying!" cried Madame Maxime. Harry ignored her outburst, choosing not to dignify that accusation with a reply. "He could not have crossed the Age Line," said McGonagall sharply. Harry suppressed his amusement. Ah, if only you knew, McGonagall... "I am sure we are all agreed on that."

"Dumbly-dorr must 'ave made a mistake wiz ze line," said Maxime, shrugging. Harry watched with sardonic amusement as McGonagall defended Dumbledore when he admitted that that was possible. Perhaps the old fool realizes that he should have put more effort into

creating that line eh? He probably did not expect any of the younger students to be able to find a way pass that line...unfortunately for him; I am not the average student.

After some time, Harry finally decided to wrap up the matter. "Mr Crouch, Mr Bagman," Harry called out politely, even as the room fell silent once more. "We have all had our say in the matter. As you're the objective judges, would you make a final decision?" Everyone stared at Harry in surprise, even as Karkaroff interjected smoothly, "An excellent suggestion, Mr. Riddle. We will of course abide by the decision of the objective judges of the Tournament."

Bagman wiped his round, boyish face with his handkerchief and looked at the polyjuiced Crouch, who was standing outside the circle of the firelight. When Crouch spoke, it was in a curt voice (Harry marvelled at Barty's acting skill). "We must follow the rule, and the rules clearly state that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the Tournament."

It appeared that Barty had, as expected, decided to aid Harry. Not for the first time, Harry was thankful for the older man's presence in his life, as the latter was almost like a brother to him. "Well, Barty knows the rulebook back to front," said Bagman beaming, as though the matter was now closed.

At this, shrill cries of protest emanated from Maxime and Fitzroy, protests which were soon silenced by the entrance of one Mad-eye Moody, ex-Auror and current Defense Against Dark Arts professor. "I don't see what the problem is," he growled, "Every school is entitled one champion, Durmstrang got its champion. End of story. The fact that the boy is younger means Durmstrang should have a disadvantage, but I don't see them complaining." Well, that was unexpected. Moody's sensible words soon silenced the room as none could find any more reason to protest.

"I have full confidence in Mr. Riddle's ability. Despite his youth, he has already taken his OWLs in eight subjects." Karkaroff announced in his oily voice. And that was the end of the matter, even as Diggory and Fitzroy both shot Harry surprised looks.

Thereafter, Bagman and the polyjuiced Crouch gave the champions details about the first task, which was to take place on Halloween. The first task would be a test on courage in the face of the unknown,

which the champions would face armed only with their wands. The champions were not to ask for or accept any kind of help to from their teachers to complete the tasks and would be exempted from tests throughout the year.

After the briefing was completed, the champions all left the room even as the adults continued to talk. Diggory fell into step beside Harry as they exited from the room, even as Fitzroy disappeared in the other direction. Offering his hand, he said, "I'm Cedric Diggory. Nice to meet you." Harry shook Diggory's hand and offered a polite smile of his own. "Harrison Riddle. A pleasure." The two walked in companionable silence for a few moments, before Diggory abruptly asked, "So, if you don't mind my asking, how did you do it?" Harry did not reply; he merely raised an eyebrow.

"Right, I suppose you wouldn't reveal that to a rival..." Diggory muttered to himself. When they reached a marble staircase, Diggory waved a cheerful goodbye to Harry before turning to a door on its right, even as Harry took the passage to the left.

When Harry reached the Slytherin common room, the portrait swung open only to reveal all of his House-mates assembled in the common room. At his entrance, everyone started clapping enthusiastically, free to give reign to their emotions now that they were away from the prying eyes of the non-Slytherins.

"Harrison!" Daphne came up to him beaming widely. "Tell us, how did you manage to do it?" Harry smiled at his friend's enthusiasm, petting her lightly on the hand. Addressing the common room, Harry allowed his eyes to rove over the crowd, drawling, "The official story, my friends," Here he paused for an extremely wide smirk, "Is that I am in no way responsible for the submission of my name into the Goblet of Fire. Nevertheless, I am to compete as the Durmstrang champion." The Slytherins all chuckled appreciatively at that – they could well understand the need for Harry to keep his actual actions a secret. But they knew, oh yes, they knew, that Harry was powerful enough to cross Dumbledore's Age Line, strong enough to be chosen as Champion, and cunning enough to get away with it. Where before the Slytherins had deferred to him because their leader Draco Malfoy had been respectful towards him, with that one act, Harry had firmly established himself as a powerful figure in his own right. And it mattered not one whit to the Slytherins that Harry was the Durmstrang champion – school rivalry had no place here,

not when Harry had been sorted into Slytherin, as everyone knew Slytherins stood by each other.

The party in the Slytherin common room went on till late in the night. Prim and proper purebloods they might be to everyone else, here, in the privacy of the common rooms, the Slytherins showed that they could party as well as anyone else. Halfway through, Harry pressed his wand to the wristband that he constantly wore, setting the place and time for those of his followers currently in Hogwarts.

Five minutes later, Harry and his followers were assembled in the heavily warded (Harry had cast many privacy and security wards on the room once he knew he would be staying there for the school year) room he shared with the Withers twins. Even Alexei and Korbin were there, despite them being in other Houses – Draco had ordered the other Slytherins to ignore their presence before escorting them to Harry's dormitory room. Leaning back against his pillow, Harry eyed his friends and followers critically. All were silent, seated, sprawled or stood in various positions, depending on their degree of familiarity with him, waiting upon him to speak. Absently, he petted Nuit, who was curled up around his left arm, lightly on the head.

"My friends," Harry began just the right note of satisfaction in his voice. "I'm sure you're all curious as to how my name came out of the Goblet of Fire. As you have all earned my trust, I will tell you the unofficial version of the story." A clever move on Harry's part it was – people were always flattered by the revelation of secrets. Harry then told them how he had taken the opportunity last night to submit his name, but he made no mention of the method he used, not that his audience would even understand the runes and arithmancy, in addition to his special sight, that he had used to temporarily disable the Age Line. Harry had had to do it personally, as the would-be champion must himself submit his name in order for there to be a valid magically binding contract – a fact which Dumbledore was undoubtedly aware of, but had temporarily disregarded in his reluctance to admit that a fifth-year like Harry could have surpassed his Age Line. Not that Dumbledore could do anything to stop Harry's participation in the Tournament, since the Goblet had chosen him.

As Harry finished his speech, Korbin whistled. "Wow, Harrison...just wow." Daphne, seated on the bed just across Harry, echoed Korbin's sentiments with elation and admiration shining in her eyes,

"You managed to get the better of Dumbledore, Harrison. That's very impressive." She appeared to be truly happy for Harry, although Harry noted that her control over her natural exuberance had vastly improved – she remained sitting primly upright, just like a proper pureblood lady, and only a slight curve of her lips betrayed her true feelings. Beside and around her, Pansy, Tracey and Millicent were all sitting or standing demurely, so Harry supposed Daphne was just acting as she was expected to when the other girls were around.

All his followers expressed their agreement, although Harry noted that Draco and Theo both looked worried. Harry knew their concerns; shaking his head minutely, he indicated that they should keep quiet for now. Then, he moved on to other topics, informing his followers to keep a watchful eye on certain students and members of the staff, ordering some to make friendly overtures with some specific people and generally indulging in information gathering and planting the seeds for his game of intrigue.

Harry put Daphne in charge of organizing the information network here, as she had been doing the same thing last year at Durmstrang, assigning Tracey (who had the least offensive reputation of the Slytherin girls) to aid her. Her first task was to subtly spread the information that fifth to seven year Slytherins could now go on nocturnal excursions without Snape's awareness (upon hearing that, the Hogwarts Slytherins expressed their admiration at Harry's achievement). Pansy, together with Millicent was in charge of watching over the Beauxbaton girls who were in Slytherin. Emlen, as Harry's third-in-command at Durmstrang, would, with Francis' help, watch over the Durmstrang students, while Korbin and Alexei would be observing Hogwarts students in their respective Houses for those whom Harry could cultivate, by building ties with them. Theo and Blaise would be compiling all the useful information about Hogwarts, not included in *Hogwarts, A History* for Harry, while Draco, as his overall second-in-command would of course keep an eye on the general going-ons. Harry did not bother giving Vincent and Gregory anything to do, as they were obviously not bright enough for the subtle work required at this stage in his plans, even as he kept the Withers twins in reserve for anything unexpected that might crop up (he also knew they would be reluctant to perform any task that would take them away from their perceived place at his side, as his bodyguards).

After dismissing everyone else, Harry turned to Draco and Theo. Now alone in the dormitory room (with the Withers twins standing guard outside), Harry raised an eyebrow at his friends. "Speak. I know you want to." Draco narrowed his eyes, then gave an agitated sigh. It was a mark of how much his friend trusted him that he allowed the infamous Malfoy pureblood mask to drop. "Harrison, what in Merlin's name were you thinking? I know for a fact that the He ordered you to stay low this year, because my father told me to keep an eye on you!" Theo winced. Only Draco would dare say that to Harrison...

Harry eyed his friend for a moment, before saying in a warning tone, "Draco, I'll let it drop this once, but please do not direct that tone at me again." Flushing slightly, Draco took a deep breath, calming himself down before replying, "I apologize for being rude, Harrison." Harry waved a hand negligently. "Apology accepted. I know you're just concerned." Then, he leaned back and shifted a sleeping Nuit off his arm and onto the bed, before sighing, "And I acknowledge your concerns. I disobeyed Father's orders; he's not going to be pleased. But I did so because I believe that it'd help my plans...not that it'd excuse me from punishment. You can go ahead and inform your fathers of what I've done immediately, not that it'd be a secret for long. And as you were both unaware of my plans until just now, there is nothing that they can do to you."

Theo snorted at that, but he wisely held his peace. Harry raised an eyebrow. Squirming, Theo confessed, "Er, Harrison, Draco actually sort of suspected that you'd put your name into the Goblet. He's been worrying about it since the letter from his father came, the one that said you were not to enter the Tournament...I did not believe him, but I guess he knows you better than I do." Harry's eyebrow rose even further. Then, he chuckled. Reaching forward, he rested a hand on Draco's shoulder. "Thanks, Draco. Thank you for trusting me and standing by me." Draco held Harry's emerald green eyes with his own grey ones for a few seconds; something passed between them, but Theo could not tell what it was. Then, Draco relaxed and drawled in his usual manner. "If you tell anyone, I will hex you. I do have a reputation to uphold, you know." Harry inclined his head in amusement, before turning serious once more. "Nevertheless, there is no need for anyone to know that, is there? I entered my name in the Goblet against Father's orders wilfully, I, and I alone, will face the consequences. Understood?" Theo and Draco nodded reluctantly but resignedly. There was nothing they

could do to alleviate Harry's responsibility and mentioning Draco's suspicions would only get Draco into additional trouble.

"Good. It's getting late. I'll see you guys tomorrow morning." Harry ended the conversation before Draco or Theo could raise any doubts. Both offered courteous good nights before leaving the dormitory, even as Harry settled down to pen a letter to his father. This is going to be one of the hardest letters I've ever tried to write...

It had been very difficult for Harry to make the decision to enter his name into the Goblet of Fire. Since the Dark Lord had adopted him, he had rarely disobeyed his father's orders and never as wilfully and deliberately as he did now. The Dark Lord had always explained the reasoning behind his orders to his son and Harry had always been content to follow orders, knowing that his father's orders were for the best. Harry respected, admired and loved his father; he made sure that his actions reflected that. Save for this time. This time, Harry was truly convinced that he was right, and his father...not that right (the Dark Lord was never wrong). And so Harry had made his decision – one of the most difficult in his life to date.

In the letter, Harry explained his actions – he restated the reasons why he believed that becoming a Champion would help his plans...It will solidify my reputation...my fame will be useful for gaining the support of the Hogwarts' students...it will open many doors... before acknowledging his father's concerns, as expressed to him that summer, then ending with arguments as to why he felt his reasons surpassed his father's concerns. Nevertheless Father, I am of the opinion that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages and hence, I entered my name into the Goblet against your orders...I acknowledge my disobedience and will await and accept any and all punishments...Harry did not however, apologize for his actions, as he did not feel that he had done anything wrong in entering his name, save that he had had to disobey his father's order (finding a way around Dumbledore's Age Line was not at all wrong in Harry's books)...not that he was suicidal enough to put that in the letter.

The next morning, Harry cast strong silencing and privacy charms on the curtains around his bed before lifting the letter out from his ornate letter-box with a solemn air. He knew his father all too well. Sure enough, upon opening the letter, he felt himself hit by a curse that seemed to mimic the effects of the Cruciatus – pain burst through his body; spasms of spasms of pure-white agony flashed

through his muscles, his veins and his bones. One minute...two...Harry gritted his teeth to keep in the sounds as long as he could, but in the end, he had no choice but to allow his screams to fill the air. It was either that, or to go mad. Thankfully, after a few seconds of him screaming, the pain stopped.

Laying panting on his bed, Harry reflected that his father had probably set the curse to stop when he started screaming. Maybe he should have given in to his screams earlier? When he was finally able to, Harry sat up and tentatively picked up the letter again (the letters Harry sent to his father and vice versa were always charmed so that contact was necessary for the words to appear). It was short and abrupt, testament to the mood his father had been in when he had penned the letter.

We will discuss this next Hogsmeade weekend. Send details.

No endearments, no names. No signature. Harry winced at the visible sign of his father's ire, even as he began planning his next move.

Dressed in black Hogwarts robes with a portion of his white collared shirt and silver-and-green tie visible beneath it, Harry entered the Great Hall, flanked by Septimus and Octavius, to a cacophony of stares, whispered speculations and murmured comments. Ensuring first that he had a pleasant and charming smile plastered on his face, Harry acknowledged the respectful semi-bows offered to him by his school mates as he passed them with small nods.

Settling himself in his by now usual seat, Harry greeted his friends before starting on breakfast. The conversation drifted to inane topics like lessons, fashion and speculations about the first task – none of the Slytherins were foolish enough to talk about sensitive topics out in the open. As he ate his fruits, toast and sausages, Harry looked up to see Karkaroff headed straight at up. Calmly, he finished up the food in his mouth before turning to greet his Highmaster.

Ten minutes later, Harry finally finished his conversation with Karkaroff, who had wanted to inform him to gather all the Durmstrang students to meet at the Durmstrang ship that evening (ostensibly the main reason but in reality, Karkaroff merely wanted to draw attention to the close relationship he had with his school's champion). Waving his wand, Harry conjured many small pieces of

paper, on which information regarding the meeting could be found. He then flicked his wand just so, and the pieces of paper folded themselves nicely and flew through the Great Hall to all the Durmstrang students.

"A neat display, Harrison! Rather attention-catching." Emlen commented lightly, eyeing the lazily flying black pieces of paper. It was indeed an excellent display of the Dark Prince's proficiency in Charms. A knowing smirk blossomed on Emlen's face as he watched the assembled students oohed and aahed at the display. Some even craned their necks to look at Harrison! It was Harrison's not-so-subtle way of showing off when the opportunity presented itself, and also had the aim of underscoring the fact that he was the Head Boy of Durmstrang. "Thank you, Emlen." Harrison replied evenly, with just the slightest hint of command in his voice, as he finished his meal. Emlen did not gulp, but he did shut up – sometimes, his leader could be downright scary.

At the staff table, Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, pondered upon the exchange he had just witnessed. A rather talented young wizard, was Harrison Riddle. Certainly, he had to be, for the Goblet to have chosen him as Champion of Durmstrang. And that was just one of the many aspects about Harrison Riddle that had caught Dumbledore's eyes and perked his curiosity. How did a underaged wizard manage to get pass his Age Line? And if it was indeed not young Harrison's work, who had done it for him? There was something mysterious about young Harrison Riddle indeed...Like his reaction's to Fawkes' song during the meeting. It fed Dumbledore's guess about the aspects of magic that young Harrison might have dabbled in, what with his education at Durmstrang and all. Dumbledore held no illusions that the young Durmstrang wizards and witches he had invited to Hogwarts were likely to turn Dark one day, if they weren't already so. And yet, given a chance, they might yet be saved. Just as the young, talented Harrison Riddle could be. Now, if only Dumbledore could just find out how...In order to do that, he first had to know more about the boy. Perhaps he would do a little digging...

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Hogwarts Year Five – Classes

After breakfast, Harry bid his year-mates goodbye and headed to seventh-year NEWT Transfiguration class with Septimus, Octavius, Steffi and a seventh-year Durmstrang Gryffindor Cerise Lavern, previously of Lavender Girls. Apparently Slytherin students shared many classes with Gryffindor students, which Harry privately thought was odd given the enmity and rivalry between the two Houses.

Entering the class, Harry noted that there were six Beauxbaton students in the room, four in Gryffindor and two in Slytherin. Alain Fitzroy was of course, surrounded by his posy of fans, including the other three Beauxbaton Gryffindors, two male and one female, and the two Slytherin Beauxbaton girls. The rest of the room was split evenly between the Hogwarts Slytherin and Gryffindor students – Harry separated from Lavern before heading towards the Slytherin side with his own followers. He sat next to a seventh-year Slytherin Prefect, who smiled at him in welcome, even as the Withers twins settled down behind him. Soon, Harry was engaging the Slytherins in amicable conversation; he had not had much opportunity to interact with the seventh-years, and he made sure to remedy that now.

The bell rang and McGonagall, with her usual stern face and pulled-back hair, strode into the room. She made a short remark about welcoming the Durmstrang and Beauxbaton students, then set about giving an introduction to human transfiguration. After a half-an-hour lecture, she told the students to pair up to practice transfiguring their partners into animals. Before Harry could start however, McGonagall had come up to him.

"Mr. Riddle", her nostril flared as she pronounced the name. McGonagall took a deep breath, then continued, "Mr. Riddle, I understand that you're attending seventh-year classes despite your age with the approval of Highmaster Karkaroff and Headmaster Dumbledore. While I fully believe in their ability to recognize talent, nevertheless, I cannot in good conscience allow your participation in my NEWT class without firsthand awareness of your ability." Harry hid a smirk at the Transfiguration professor's words.

"I fully understand your concerns, ma'am." Harry replied smoothly. "Perhaps you would care for a demonstration?" McGonagall look startled. In actual fact, she had been about to suggest that the boy

take a diagnostic test of some sort, but upon hearing the boy's words and the look of confidence on his face, she nodded faintly. It was actually a good idea; she was adept enough at teaching Transfiguration that she would be able to tell his level from his attempt. Just as she was about to suggest an object for the boy to transfigure however, the boy spoke.

"Septimus." Harry indicated the space in front of him; Septimus Withers inclined his head and acquiesced. "Of course, my prince."

Harry bit back a sigh at that title. He hadn't yet gotten around to finding the culprit behind the cheering when his name had come out of the cup but he knew that his friends and followers were used to his title of 'Dark Prince'. As such, he was now resigned to being referred to by his title, even if it would cause suspicions and comments.

Patiently, Harry waited until Septimus was waiting in front of him – he was fairly sure that the latter had some idea of what Harry was about to do, even if McGonagall begun to knit her eyebrows together into a puzzled frown. Harry nodded politely at her, then stated. "I will begin." With that, he concentrated, visualized and waved his wand.

Slowly, Septimus begun to change. His blonde hair shortened then spread over his body, his muscles and bones spasmed, twisted and rearranged themselves. His face and limbs lengthened even as his ears crept up to atop his head and his nose turned black, triangular and moist. A tail sprung from his behind, fingernails sharpened into claws, whiskers sprouted from his face. Then finally, around his head, a crowning glory of brown hair sprouted as a mane. With a loud roar, the Septimus-turned-lion announced the completion of the Transfiguration.

All heads who weren't already watching the show swivelled to the lion now crouching in the middle of the classroom. For a moment, there was stunned silence, then, awed exclamations could be heard around the room.

Minerva McGonagall was astounded. Amazing, she thought, even as she walked around the transfigured lion. Riddle had showed an astonishing amount of control and precision for his age. The transfiguration was not over-powered, nor was it haphazardly performed, as many powerful young wizards who tried to force

Transfiguration with their power alone tended to do. The fact that it was still stable after thirty seconds proved that Riddle was in fact, doing the Transfiguration correctly. And the details of the lion...the realistic roar, the fine whiskers, the twitching of the nose...Minerva could safely say that she had not seen such talent in her NEWT Transfiguration class since...well, James Potter came the closest almost twenty years ago, but even he was not able to perform human Transfiguration at the beginning of his seventh year. It looks like Albus' doubts about his abilities proved to be unfounded...

"If there are no objections, Professor, I will reverse the Transfiguration now." Riddle's voice cut through her thoughts. Dazedly, Minerva nodded. With another wave of his wand, the lion slowly turned back into a lean, muscular young man with blonde hair, who gracefully sprang to his feet as soon as he returned to his original form. Polite clapping issued from the Slytherin half of the room, as well as the Beauxbaton students even as the most Gryffindors stared open-mouthed. Glancing at Riddle, Minerva realized that he was waiting politely for her verdict on the Transfiguration demonstration.

Clearing her throat, Minerva found her voice. "A splendid demonstration, Mr. Riddle. Take thirty points to Slytherin. You have admirably proven your ability to keep up with my seventh-year NEWT class. And all of you should be able to perform to this standard by the end of this term." Sternly, Minerva turned to address the rest of the class. "Now start practising with your partners."

Harry hid a smirk when the Transfiguration professor assigned him thirty points. He just knew it would be a good idea to Transfigure Septimus into the house symbol of the Gryffindors, although he knew that the Slytherins might be slightly disgruntled. But hey, it got Harry into McGonagall's good books and thirty points for Slytherin, so he did not think the Slytherins had any grounds to complain. Besides, they wouldn't even dare to do so.

Plastering a polite smile on his face, Harry nodded earnestly as McGonagall turned back to him and gave him tips on how to make his Transfiguration even better, most of which he already knew, yet had chosen not to implement, in a bid to hide his true prowess. At the end of the small speech, she belatedly added sternly, "And it would be good if you asked for your classmate's permission in future before performing the Transfiguration on them." Solemnly, Harry

inclined his head. "I'm sure that Septimus does not mind in the slightest; however, I will bear that in mind in future, Professor."

Septimus chose that moment to shake his head and interject, "Professor, there was no need to seek my permission; it is my honour to be chosen to aid...Harrison. We would gladly assist him in whatever way we can." At this, the Slytherins all fell silent, but none objected. Indeed, Harry noted that a few students, most of them from Durmstrang, looked to be on the verge of agreement, but Slytherin decorum and the need to hide their true feelings won out in the end. Although, Harry thought irritably, Septimus should not have put it that way. McGonagall might become suspicious...Come to think of it, there's something strange about the Withers twins this year...

Thankfully, McGonagall seemed not to note the hidden meaning in Septimus' words. "That's very friendly of you, Mr. Withers." With that generic statement and pursed lips, she turned back to the lesson, although not before she bestowed a small smile on Harry. It looks like McGonagall isn't immune to my charms...Harry thought in amusement, satisfied that his calculated behaviour in class today had paid off.

After the lesson, Harry cornered Septimus and Octavius in an empty classroom. Regarding the two older teenagers with cool eyes, Harry spoke coldly, "Septimus. Octavius. Your recent behaviour has been...less than exemplary. I am now giving you a chance to explain." Noting the visible winces and the exchange of glances between the two, Harry fixed both with a cold stare that was known to make even Bellatrix Lestrange pause in her steps. Under the weight of that stare, the twins slowly lowered themselves until they were kneeling on the ground.

After a moment of silence, Septimus spoke up. "My prince, we did not mean to anger you..." He begun hesitantly, before exchanging yet another glance with his twin. A silent communication had to have passed between them, for Octavius then continued, "You know of our family history, my prince, you know that we are from a family who follows the old pureblood tradition. You know of our culture...you know of the choice that the younger males make once we come of age." Harry stared at the twins as realization hit him. Of course! That must be why they were so insistent of being my bodyguards this year.

"You both have chosen then." Harry said. It was not a question. The twins exchanged another glance, then nodded simultaneously. Nervously, Septimus swallowed, then spoke up. "We have chosen you, my prince." Harry blinked once, twice, then narrowed his eyes as the implications of that statement hit him.

Male scions of old pure-blood families who were not the heir to the House usually had two choices when they came of age. The twins could have chosen to remain loyal to their family, to support the House of Withers in its ambitions, ideology or goals, but they had instead chosen to give their loyalty to him. It was not something done lightly; indeed, of all the Death Eaters who followed the Dark Lord, only Barty Crouch Jr. and the Lestranges had ever pledged themselves in this manner, and the latter few only because the head of the Lestrangle House, Rodolphus Lestrangle, had pledged his House to the Dark Lord's cause. Of Harry's followers who came of age that year, Aleron and Silas were both heirs to House Mulciber and House Macnair respectively, so they did not have the choice of making such a deep pledge of loyalty until they became Head of their Houses. Although Harry did not need a formal pledge from them to know that Aleron was utterly his and through him and by Harry's own merits, he had a strong pull on Silas as well. So it came of somewhat as a surprise to Harry that the twins had taken this step.

"And when were you going to inform me of this development?" Harry's voice was chilly. The Withers twins both winced and lowered their heads in consternation. But Harry's followers were not weak, for Octavius eventually replied, albeit rather hesitantly, "In time for the mid-winter solstice, when we would have to make our vows to you."

Harry eyed the top of his two followers' head as they fidgeted like naughty schoolboys under his gaze. At length, he spoke, "You know better than to withhold information from me, Septimus and Octavius Withers. Your keeping of secrets has caused your irrational behaviour. Even if it springs from a desire to serve, I will not allow it to go unpunished. And from now on, see that you follow my lead." Harry all but hissed the last sentence, allowing his irritation with the twins to show.

Both flinched. Then, Septimus raised his head, straightened his spine and answered with a composed voice, "We understand, my

prince. We apologize for our deplorable behaviour. It will not happen again." Both bowed deeply, showing their contrition.

"You will be punished at a later date." The matter settled, Harry strode out of the classroom even as both twins sprang to their feet and fell in step behind him.

During lunch period, Harry spent most of the time at the library completing the homework that McGonagall had assigned before joining the fifth-year Ravenclaw-Slytherin study group that the Hogwarts Slytherin were part of. Four Ravenclaws and six Slytherins(excluding Vincent and Gregory, whose presence were not missed) made up the study group originally. Harry's arrival with the rest of the Durmstrang Slytherin fifth-years increased the total to a large enough group that they had to occupy four large tables in the library. After finishing his own studies, Harry helped the other Slytherins and Ravenclaws with theirs. Initially, the Ravenclaws seemed slightly wary of the Durmstrang students' presence, but after Harry explained a few difficult concepts that even the Ravenclaws had trouble grasping, the Ravenclaws looked at Harry with a new look of respect in their eyes. A pretty Indian girl, Padma Patil, even voiced her admiration for Harry's intelligence, which Harry shrugged off with a show of modesty. Then the bell rang, and Harry headed for Duelling class with the rest of the other Slytherin fifth-years, while the Ravenclaws headed to their Transfiguration class.

Duelling lessons were held in a large classroom. There were tables and chairs aplenty, however, the front half of the classroom was empty, possibly for demonstrations. This time, Harry sat right at the very back with Draco and Theo flanking him. The more distance between James Potter and him the better, for Harry did not wish to test his self-control by sitting in close proximity to the biological father who had abandoned him.

Indeed, so caught up with his thoughts on James Potter Harry was, that he did not even take note when Ronald Weasley begun to speak loudly to his bunch of Gryffindor friends, one of whom was Longbottom. Harry noted absently that Granger was not in this class, then shifted his attention away even as Weasley raised his voice. "...cheater of a Slytherin Durmstrang...probably used the Dark Arts to get his name into the Goblet...slimy Slytherin..."

Before Harry even registered that Weasley was actually referring to him, Draco was sauntering towards Weasley's table. "Do keep your mouth shut, Weasley. While we all know your intelligence is below that of a Flobberworm's, why don't you at least try to hide that fact?" Draco drawled in lazy tones, in stark contrast with his tense muscles. Even as Harry saw Weasley's face turn pink out of the corner of his eye, he could not help but feel slightly irritated at Draco's behaviour. Not at the fact that Draco was standing up for him no, but at the fact that Draco had not even looked to Harry for permission before he had headed off to humiliate Weasley. Was it because Draco had felt that it was his duty to do so as leader of the Hogwarts Slytherins? No matter, Draco would learn his place. Even if he was Harry's best friend, Harry could not allow this; Draco would have to learn to follow Harry's lead in all things.

Before Harry could say anything however, James Potter had entered the classroom. Upon seeing the Slytherin and Gryffindor facing off, James Potter said loudly, "Malfoy, back to your seat. Ten points from Slytherin for not being seated before the lesson starts." If Harry had not had good control over his every facial feature, his eyebrow would have shot up. James Potter's behaviour was distinctly unfair. Ten points taken off just for not being seated? It reminded Harry of Snape's potions class, save that Potter was biased against Slytherins. Glancing around, Harry noted that although the Slytherins scowled at Potter's words, they did not protest. Harry drew the conclusion that, apparently, protesting was rather futile in Potter's class.

Harry's mind whirled furiously as he calculated the best course of action he could take in this class. While he had originally aimed to lay low and merely observe James Potter, after seeing Potter's bias against Slytherins, he changed his mind. Therefore, when Potter started asking questions halfway into the lecture, Harry made sure to raise his hand for alternate questions. By the end of the question and answer session, such were the quality of Harry's answers that Potter had begrudgingly giving Slytherin a total of fifteen points (It turned out that Potter, being the Gryffindor that he was, was not able to be wholly unfair to his students). The whole time, Harry's attitude towards Potter was the epitome of the model student; polite, modest and slightly enthusiastic.

"Okay now, to put theory into practice. Now remember, I want you to show me that power isn't everything! Duels can be won with the

simplest of spells. Who'd like to volunteer for a short duel with your fellow classmate? I will give the winner of the duel fifteen points for their House." Potter asked cheerfully. No Slytherin worth his salt would ever take Potter up on his offer, as it went against their basic tenets of self-preservation. It was with no surprise though, that a couple of hands were raised from the Gryffindor side of the room...the Slytherins snickered, until, to their utmost surprise, one hand rose from amidst the sea of Slytherin students.

Harry kept his blandly polite smile fixed on his face even as he saw Potter do the tiniest of double-takes. No doubt Potter was surprised at a Slytherin volunteering to do anything in his class – Harry had noted that of all the Slytherins, only the Durmstrang students had raised their hands to attempt to answer Potter's questions. But Harry was equally sure that Potter would not pass up a chance to pit his favoured Gryffindors against a Slytherin. Sure enough, Potter called out, "Well then, let's have Ronald and Mr. Riddle, shall we?" Blatant favouritism that he doesn't even try to hide. Really now, using first names in class? Harry said nothing however, as he smoothly rose from his seat and made his way to the front of the classroom.

Once there, Harry tossed Weasley a smirk even as the classroom fell into interested silence. It was so quiet that one could even hear the sound of a pin drop. The students, it appeared, were extremely interested in what the Durmstrang champion could offer. James Potter regarded Weasley with a fond smile on his face, then he turned to Harry. "Now, let's stick to duelling etiquette, shall we? Bow to each other...that's right." A grin blossomed on Potter's face as he stepped out of the range of the would-be-duelists. "Ready? You'll start on the count of three. One, two, three!"

Daphne Greengrass watched with hidden amusement as Harrison managed to deliver an elegant bow that somehow managed to convey disdain even as Weasley gave a jerky nod of his head. While she did not know what Harrison could be planning, she knew without a doubt that it would be some well-calculated move that would serve to catapult Harrison even higher in his peers' esteem – Harrison was like that that way.

He was an extraordinary young man, to be sure. Since Harrison's appearance in her life six years ago, Daphne had felt herself inexorably drawn to him. And she wasn't the only one; all the children in his social circle felt the pull of his charisma and power.

They had all been affected by his very presence. With all of her strong intuitive ability, Daphne was certain that were it not for Harrison's influence, Draco, whom she had known since forever, would have grown into a spoilt, pampered brat-prince of a Malfoy. Theo now...recalling the aloof, slightly spiteful yet intelligent child she had met when she was six, Daphne concluded that Theo would have grown into an intelligent yet reclusive introvert, and certainly not the person he currently was, that was for sure. Pansy...her childhood friend whom she had giggled over dolls with, and whom was certainly deeply infatuated with Draco...Daphne shuddered to think of what Pansy could have become had Draco turned out to be a spoilt, obnoxious brat. As for Vince and Greg...well, unfortunately nothing could cure their stupidity. On the bright side, they seemed well content with the role of being Draco's lackeys, and Draco certainly treated them well enough.

And for herself...Daphne had made a choice last year. Watching Harrison date those two shallow girls had caused her to realize that she had feelings for the young man in question. Feelings that went beyond the friendship that they had forged, feelings that had resulted in ugly jealousy; feelings that had caused her to finally throw away voluntarily the last vestiges of the carefree and innocent girl she had been. Daphne had made her choice. And this time, unlike in her first year, when she had been oh-so-cautious of committing herself to Harrison on the Durmstrang ship, Daphne would stand by her choice come what may be. Even if Harrison was as yet unready to deal with her feelings, as her intuition told her...she could wait. In the meantime, Daphne would aid Harrison in whatever way she could.

And if that included observing the students around her covertly as they watched the demonstration duel between Harrison and Weasley...well, Daphne would ensure that she would have a lot to tell Harrison about each individual's reaction after everything...

Draco watched closely as his friend dodged to the right slightly as Weasley shot a leg-locker curse at him. Is that the best you can do, Weasley? Draco sneered mentally as he watched his schoolyard rival start off with that elementary spell. Shaking his head mentally, Draco narrowed his eyes slightly as Harrison retaliated with the commonly used Stupefy. Of course, Harrison would not want to reveal the true extent of his knowledge for a simple class duel...or

perhaps he's waiting for the best opportunity?

As hexes and sometimes curses flew through the air, Draco could not help but marvel at the grace and fluidity with which Harrison weaved around Weasley's spells. He returned fire only sporadically, choosing to side-step most of Weasley's spells. His moves were elegant, intricate and smooth, much like the steps of a dance. Indeed, if the flourishes were anything to go by, Harrison was intentionally embellishing his usual fighting style. Draco had had the honour of observing one duel between Harrison and the Dark Lord; his friend's usual style was much quicker, more efficient and ruthless, albeit it not being one bit less elegant. And of course, his friend was casting his spells verbally, enunciating them loud and clearly, probably in order to hide his proficiency with non-verbal spells.

Five minutes into the duel, Weasley was already sporting green hair, antlers, twitchy ears and an engorged left arm. Prudently, Harrison had stuck to simple hexes, instead of his usual curses. Although Draco made sure his face was bland, he knew his grey eyes were alight with excitement as Weasley, finally realizing that Harrison could have ended the duel long ago and was merely toying with him, grew extremely red in the face. "FIGHT ME LIKE A MAN, RIDDLE!" Weasley's bellow filled the entire classroom, even as he lunged at Harrison. Draco could barely suppress a sneer. Trust a Weasley to act like a boorish Muggle indeed...

The answering smirk on Harrison's face caused a small shudder to run down Draco's spine. He knew that smirk very well indeed. Coolly, Harrison side-stepped Weasley's lunge and swept out with his left foot. Bang! Weasley was sprawled on his back. "Rictusempra." Harrison enunciated clearly, sending a jet of blue light at Weasley. A tickling charm...Harrison is going easily on him...

Instead of uncontrollable laughter however, Weasley broke out into loud screams. It wasn't the I-can't-stop-laughing-no-matter-how-much-I-want-to kind of scream. It was the screams of a man in excruciating pain.

"Can't you even take a tickling charm, Weasley? Alas, I had hoped for better from a student of the noble and brave House of Gryffindor." Harrison was regarding Weasley with a bland expression which Draco knew would do worse to Weasley's pride

than the trademark smirk he wore. Draco, meanwhile, was puzzled. He furrowed his brows even as he contemplated the scene before him. While he knew Weasley was an inept prat of a boy, even he was not so cowardly as to break out into screams at a tickling charm. And no matter how much power Harrison had poured into the tickling charm (and Draco knew that Harrison was capable of pouring a lot of power into his spells), it still should not be able to tear screams like that from Weasley.

After a few moments, James Potter hastily stopped the duel, declaring Harrison the winner of the duel and awarding him fifteen points with a sour face, words which Harrison accepted graciously. Draco could tell that Potter was all but ready to swallow a lemon rather than accept the victory of a Slytherin, but he had had no choice. Snickering softly, Draco caught Potter glaring furiously at Harrison. After all, Harrison had indeed shown that power was not required to win a duel – none of the spells that he had used was above fourth-year level. It had been his agility, coupled with his precise aiming, that had won him the duel.

Over dinner, the news quickly made its rounds throughout Slytherin house and to the rest of the school. Harrison Riddle, Durmstrang champion and Slytherin, had somehow managed to get a total of thirty points in James Potter's class, a feat which no other Slytherin had managed to perform before him. And he had done so in such a sneaky and subtle manner. In the house of the serpents, such a move was admired and applauded by all. Even students from the other Houses had begun to look at Harry with a newfound respect in their eyes. Harry was satisfied; his plan had achieved the desired effect.

As dessert was served, Draco finally could not rein in his curiosity any longer. "So Harrison, how did you do it? That tickling charm that caused Weasley to scream like a little girl?" Harry smirked as he recalled that particular move. What he had in fact sent at Weasley was not a tickling charm, despite the incantation he had pronounced. Capable of non-verbal magic, Harry had sent a blood boiling curse, that had manifested itself as a jet of blue light identical to that of a tickling charm, at Weasley, before making a show of speaking the incantation for the tickling charm immediately. Such was his speed that Harry had managed to pass off his semi-dark curse as a harmless tickling charm.

"A Slytherin never reveals his secrets, Draco." Harry smirked as Draco mock-scowled and Daphne, who was seated at his other side, smiled appreciatively. Turning to her, Harry was surprised when she raised amused blue-grey eyes to his own and stated, "It was a brilliant tactic, Harrison." Somehow, Daphne had figured out the move he had pulled.

That night, in a corner of the Slytherin common room under a strong privacy ward, Daphne informed Harry of the information that she had gleaned from studying the students' reactions. "...so you see Harrison, all of the Hogwarts and Durmstrang Slytherins are firmly on your side. As for the Gryffindors, a few of them are awed by your abilities." Harry nodded thoughtfully, filing away the information she had given him for future reference, even as he smiled in thanks at the head of his small information network. It was a fact that the delicate slip of a girl beside him was one of the few who could bring out a true smile from him.

A few minutes after that, Harry gestured to Draco. "We need to talk." Draco narrowed his eyes slightly at the extremely bland tone that Harry was using, then nodded and followed Harry back to the privacy of Harry's dormitory room.

When they reached the room, Harry closed the door and activated the privacy ward he had set up around the dormitory room. He nodded to the Withers twins, who were already in the room, then turned to face Draco and regarded Draco silently. "You know what this is about, Draco." Upon hearing those words, Draco's grey eyes seemed to be a maelstrom of emotions, although his face remained smooth in his usual mask. Harry watched as confusion, realization then stubbornness, shame and guilt followed one another across Draco eyes – Draco was smart enough to figure out what Harry was talking about on his own, if the crossed, defensive arms across the pale blond's chest were any indication.

Harry narrowed his eyes and directed his piercing gaze to meet Draco's. After a few moments, Draco looked away, exhaled, and lowered his arms to his side. His eyes darted to the Withers twins, standing silent and solemn in the background, before it returned to Harry's. Harry met his best friend's gaze with his own implacable one. Draco was certainly smart enough to figure out what the presence of the Withers twins meant – and smart enough to know what Harry wanted from him. He was also loyal enough to give

Harry what he wanted; Harry watched as Draco surrendered to the inevitability of the situation.

Straightening his spine, Draco went down into a formal kneel, suitable for the occasion. "My prince," Draco started with startling sincerity, his pale grey eyes locked on Harry, "I undermined your authority today by failing to follow your lead. I hereby tender my sincere apologies and beg forgiveness for my offence." A public apology, made so by the presence of the Wither twins. Humiliation, for to one such as a Malfoy, having to deliver a public apology was in itself that. Harry judged Draco sufficiently punished. "Rise, Draco. I accept your apology." With a wordless gesture to the twins, Harry bade them leave the room.

When only Draco was left, Harry gestured for Draco to seat on his bed, even as Harry sat down beside him. "You know why I had to do that." Harry said at last, his gaze on the ceiling. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Draco nod. Somewhat ruefully, Draco replied, "You had to do that because I made it necessary for you to do that." Harry met Draco's eyes again; there were no recriminations there, only lingering tension, shame and acceptance. Neutrally, Harry ordered, "See that it never becomes necessary again."

The rest of the week passed in a flurry of classes, even as Harry settled down to life at Hogwarts. All of his seventh-year classes proved to be just challenging enough to be interesting, while the other new subjects he had taken only upon entering Hogwarts, Care of Magical Creatures, Defence Against Dark Arts and Muggle Studies proved to be intriguing. While Harry, like the other Slytherins, did not approve of an unqualified teacher of a half-giant teaching the Care of Magical Creatures subject, he found that he actually did learnt something from the hands-on experience in classes.

Defence Against Dark Arts was yet another intriguing subject, no less because it was taught by paranoid ex-Auror Mad-Eye Moody who seemed determined to drill his favourite phrase, "Constant Vigilance!" into the heads of the students. The first lesson was on the three Unforgivables. Despite already knowing more about it than most grown adults, Harry was still vastly entertained by the class, mainly because of his fellow students' reactions; the Slytherins acted stoic, but Harry could see their fascination with the three curses, the Ravenclaws immediately started taking notes feverishly, even as their eyes appeared to bulge out of the sockets, so intent

were they upon observing even the slightest details. As for Harry, he took it upon himself to answer all the questions that Moody asked of the class in vivid detail, relying on the fact that he came from a school reputed for its teaching of the Dark Arts to shield him from suspicion.

Muggle Studies. Harry had no doubt that if his father knew that he had taken up this subject, he'd be subjected to a few well-placed curses. Despite all of the Dark Lord's lectures to Harry about not giving in to mindless hatred, Harry knew that his father still held Muggles with a poisonous contempt and disdain. Perhaps it was due to his upbringing at the Muggle orphanage (Harry had been extremely touched when his father had deigned to share that bit of his own history with him), but despite all that the Dark Lord knew of the destructive capabilities of the Muggles, he still thought them inferior and unworthy. Harry knew better than to talk about Muggles whilst he lived with his father and his various aunts and uncles. However, he was of the opinion that he should learn as much about them as he could, especially if they would be his enemies in the future (after Voldemort was done conquering the wizarding world of course). So secretly, Harry signed up for Muggle Studies classes taught by Charity Burbage and endured through the first lesson on what Muggle children learnt in school. Having lived in the Wizarding World since he turned seven, Harry was as ignorant of these subjects as the average pureblood wizard.

At night, Harry concentrated on his private studies in Dark Arts, Necromancy and Wards, as well as his own private research on demons. Harry had brought all the books he needed for his studies to Hogwarts, charmed so that these questionable books would not be visible to any save a Parselmouth. Through his books and correspondence courses with his Durmstrang professors, Harry kept up with his studies, at least for theory, in these subjects.

Other than classes, Harry found himself enjoying the social life at Hogwarts; he made sure that he spent time studying with the fifth-year Slytherins and Ravenclaws. Harry spent time sowing the seeds of friendship with various pure-blood Ravenclaw students, such as Padma Patil, Anthony Goldstein, Su Li and Stephen Cornfoot. What Draco could not manage to do in his four years at Hogwarts Harry would succeed in doing.

It worked to a certain extent. When 'Support Cedric Diggory – the Hogwarts Champion' badges came out in the second week of Harry's education at Hogwarts, none of the Slytherins wore the badges, nor did the Ravenclaw students who studied with Harry. However, practically most of the other students of Hogwarts wore the badges with pride. Harry forbid Emlen from coming up with his own 'Support Harrison Riddle – Durmstrang Champion' badge; emphasizing the differences between himself and the Hogwarts students was not what Harry wanted to do.

As the weekend rolled closer, Harry could not help but feel a tendril of nervousness invade him – for there would be a Hogsmeade visit that Saturday. While the average student would be nervous about which date to take to the village, Harry was nervous about the upcoming confrontation with his father.

Chapter Thirty: Hogwarts Year Five – Maneuverings

Harry stood tense and silent in the Dark Lord's study as his father regarded him with narrowed crimson eyes. Despite the noon sunlight, the study remained a place of shadowy darkness. Saturday had arrived all too soon for Harry's liking. After heading to Hogsmeade, he had Flooed to his father's Manor using the fireplace at Dervish and Banges, through Malfoy Manor, whose wards would serve to confuse any would-be trackers. The Withers twins had been ordered to cover his absence, so Harry was relatively confident that his sojourn would not be missed.

That is, if his trip lasted for less than three hours. Yet given that Harry had been standing silently at that spot for close to twenty minutes already, he could not help but feel that it might not go according to plan. Unfortunately, under the circumstances, he had to await his father's pleasure. And Harry knew better than to show any hint of impatience. That would be an intolerable weakness.

At long last, the pasty-white figure robed in black tapped his long spindly fingers on the armchair and hissed. "Surely you recall the conversation we had at the end of summer, my son." At Harry's stiff nod, the Dark Lord continued in a dangerously low voice. "Explain then, the reason behind your recent disobedience."

Harry had to suppress a gulp at the underlying rage beneath his father's calm voice. Now. How to talk his way out of the uncomfortable situation? There was no guarantee that he would succeed, but he could have at least tried to wiggle his way out of punishment. But it wouldn't do to babble up excuses like a frightened child, no. In this situation, the best approach was to be logical, rational and slightly submissive. Not so much that it would be considered weakness, but enough so that his father would not perceive his attitude as aggressive.

Fixing his gaze at a point just beyond his father's head, Harry made sure his Occlumency shields were firmly in place before he tried, "I want the Hogwarts students, Father. Other than the Slytherins, none of the other students are receptive to recruitment. As a foreign Durmstrang student, I do not have the leverage to change their minds. As the champion of Durmstrang however, many doors are open to me. That is the reason behind my disobedience; however, I make no excuses."

As Voldemort stilled his fingers, he pinned Harry with a look that would freeze the blood of any sane person. "Is that the only reason?" For what seemed like an endless moment, father and son held each other's gaze. Despite his cool demeanor, inside, Harry was squirming with consternation. How did he know? How much should I say?

In the end, Harry allowed his shoulders to droop slightly. "You know me too well, Father. Yes, I admit: the thought of victory is a very strong allure." And the thought of showing the Light – Dumbledore, Potter, everyone, how strong the person who was once Harry James Potter truly is. However, that Harry did not say aloud. It was not something he was ready to admit to his father – the fact that the Light had that much influence over his actions. Instead, he met his father's gaze unflinchingly. Observing the Dark Lord's tight, narrow eyes, Harry knew that his father was still holding on to his rage behind a cool façade. This did not bode well...it was time for that hint of submissiveness. "I know I should not have disobeyed...but...Please allow me to do this, Father." Harry lowered his head at the last, hoping that the show of vulnerability would appease the Dark Lord.

After a few moments of silence, the Dark Lord eventually inclined his head. "Very well. I will allow you to continue this farce upon three conditions. You will take care not to draw the old fool's attention. You will be victorious in the Tournament. And lastly, your participation in the Tournament will not affect your performance in other aspects, whether it be your academics or your maneuverings."

At that, Harry looked up. He had to struggle to suppress his grin even as he replied in formal cadences, "I understand Father. Thank you." Harry was quite sure though, that his father did not miss the exhilarated delight in his eyes that he did not deem necessary to hide. Sure enough, Harry caught sight of the hidden amusement in the Dark Lord's red eyes that prompted him to add in a slightly cheeky manner, "If I don't get 'Outstanding's for all the OWLs and NEWTs that I'm taking this year, you can take the whip to my hide, Father."

The amusement in the Dark Lord's eyes became even more apparent. "Insolent brat. Be rest assured, I will hold you to that." For a moment, father and son shared a moment of merriment, then the

Dark Lord's eyes turned flinty again. "Now, shall we move on to the matter of your act of disobedience?" Harry blinked. So much for hoping that his father would waive the punishment for that. Inclining his head, Harry squared his shoulders in resignation as he prepared himself to face whatever punishment Voldemort would mete out for his disobedience – something his father could not tolerate.

Later that night, Harry lay in bed examining the events of the day. As harsh as the punishment had been, Harry had to admit to himself that he regretted not one whit of his actions. Given the choice again, he would choose as he had done – disobey his father in order to further his own plans. Harry would do what he thought was correct. With a start, Harry realized that he was pushing the boundaries of his relationship with his father. Was this a symptom of the phenomenon called teenage rebellion that most adolescents went through? Certainly, he had seen some of his friends and followers in that phase; even when pressured by his father that summer, Draco had refused to study wizarding law, Daphne had dressed with non-conforming bizarreness for a few months last year...even the usually reasonable Alonzo had gone through a period of rebelliousness a few summers ago, when he had flaunted his homo-sexuality in his parents' face. Yes, Harry rather thought that his out-of-character own actions were the result of his growing up process.

Deciding to put the matter to the back of his mind, Harry started pondering about more immediate affairs. The first task. Since Barty was one of the Triwizard judges, he had informed Harry about the task in great detail – the champions had to retrieve a golden egg by getting past a nesting mother dragon – a Chinese Fireball, a Swedish Short-Snout or a Hungarian Horntail. While Harry was extremely confident of his ability to deal with any one of the dragons, he now had to decide on what to do with the information. Should he inform the other champions about the task? He was quite confident that even with prior knowledge, neither of his competitors would outperform him. With the right person, he could easily gain their gratitude....from his personal observations of Diggory's personality and information from his spies, Diggory would certainly be grateful. However, Fitzroy was too much of an enigma at this moment for Harry to risk it. Yes, Harry would inform only Diggory while keeping an eye on Fitzroy.

The next morning, Harry sat down to breakfast in the Great Hall, keeping an eye on the general conversation amongst the Slytherins

but did not participate. Spearing his sausage, he took a huge bite....and felt a stir of magic in the air. Something...there was something about the sausage he had just partaken, Harry was certain. He glanced up and observed that the Slytherins around him were all staring at him with expressions ranging from surprise, shock, hilarity to anger. A sinking suspicion filled Harry...With a wave of his wand, Harry conjured a mirror and stared into it.

An ugly monster stared back. With golden pock-marked skin and bright red hair, Harry looked liked the Gryffindor mascot from someone's worst nightmares. Harry was sure that if he had not already had gold skin, it would have flushed a bright red at the humiliation and anger he currently felt at his appearance being forcibly changed in the middle of the Great Hall. Ah yes, a prank. The act of the Weasley twins probably...or maybe...His gaze slid to the Gryffindor table where Ronald Weasley was pointing in his direction and laughing uproariously. Next to him, Martin Potter was staring at Harry with what appeared to be equal parts smugness and dislike. Well, well. Supicious. Weasley had certainly been humiliated in Duelling class. Did he draw Potter into this? As an act of revenge perhaps?

No matter. Harry first had to deal with the situation. Keeping a check on his temper, Harry begun to analyze the spell. Colour-changing charm, a bit of timed transfiguration, a modified sticking charm...there was nothing too complicated on its own, but it was a rather difficult blend to pull off. Harry narrowed his eyes. This was nothing that Ronald Weasley or Martin Potter could have put together – of that Harry was absolutely certain of. This hinted at an innovative genius that only the Weasley twins could have pulled off. And what a brand of genius it was too!

It would have been quite difficult to reverse, since Harry did not know of the exact combination of magic. However, if there was one thing Harry was good at, it was at thinking up novel solutions. With a calm wave of his wand, he cast a subtle glamour upon himself – one that would make it appear that he was his normal self.

Murmurs of awe filled the Great Hall. The students all thought that Harry had found a counter-spell. Never had one of the Weasley's pranks been so easily countered – even professors had problems dealing with some of their pranks. Harry smirked viciously. All in all, the Weasley-Potter's attempt to ridicule Harry merely made him

seem all the more powerful. But both Weasley and Potter would pay – Harry would make sure of that. Oh yes, there will be consequences for this little prank, little fools.

Around him, the chatter at the Slytherin table started up once more. After a few covert glances at Harry, where the students observed that Harry was finishing up his breakfast calmly as if nothing had happened, none so much as alluded to the prank – they all took his cue and went about their normal breakfast routine. Had it been any other student, there would have been teasing, amusement, offers of vengeance, perhaps. But such was the magnitude of Harry's control over the Slytherins that none even dared to make one wrongful blink.

"Hey Diggory." Harry called out to Cedric Diggory one day after Ancient Runes lesson, which was a shared lesson with students from all four houses. "I'd like a word with you." The handsome student looked startled for a moment, but his expression quickly smoothed over. There was nothing out of the ordinary for Harry to request a word, for the two were casual acquaintances who occasionally conversed with each other when they met in the library or while travelling through the castle. "Sure, why not?" He gestured for his friends, some of whom were shooting Harry suspicious looks, to leave the classroom first.

Harry waited patiently for the classroom to empty. Then, with a flick of his wand, he cast a privacy spell around the area. "It's a week till the first task, Diggory. I trust that your preparations are going well?" Harry commented casually, with a careless wave of his hand. Diggory's expression morphed into one of suspicion. "Yeah," Diggory answered carefully. "I've been preparing a lot; I'm sure I'll be ready by the first task."

Tapping one finger steadily on a nearby desk, Harry regarded Diggory with an assessing gaze. "You do not have to be so wary, Diggory. I'm not here to pick your brains, neither am I here to harm you." Harry watched as a slow flush crept up Diggory's cheeks. Interesting. So Diggory was not as naïve as he appeared to be. "I didn't mean to imply..." Harry eyed Diggory with amusement as the latter tried to make excuses.

Holding up a hand, Harry stopped Diggory with a raised eyebrow. "Enough, Diggory. I won't take offense." At the look of relief on Diggory's face, Harry had to suppress a smirk. Oh, but it was so

easy to play these open, honest types like a fiddle. So easy to manipulate their emotions so that they reacted exactly as Harry wished. "I'm here, Diggory, to tell you about the first task. We'd have to get past dragons."

After revealing that, Harry leaned back against the nearest desk to enjoy the play of emotions across Diggory's face. Alarm, confusion, gratitude, suspicion and wariness all crossed the broad, handsome face of the older student. Harry knew exactly what Diggory was thinking. "Really, Diggory. Why would I try to sabotage you by feeding you false information when the truth can be so easily obtained? Your father works in the Ministry; you could get him to check it for you if you doubt my words. Bringing in three dragons to Britain would certainly leave paper trails. It's your choice, really, whether to believe me or not." Harry waved a careless hand, calculated to put Diggory at ease.

Rubbing his face with his hand, Diggory sighed then said, "I believe you. But why, why are you telling me this, Riddle?" There was open confusion in that voice, tinged with curiosity. Now, how should I spin this? Harry put on an expression of sincerity. "It's only fair, Diggory. I have no doubt that as resourceful as Madame Maxime is, she would find out about the dragons and inform Fitzroy about it. And since I know about the dragons too, it would not be fair if you were the only champion who is in the dark about it. I want us to compete on a level playing field, Diggory." It was a reason that people like Diggory would easily believe. Harry watched as the muscles in Diggory's face relaxed. So trusting. Fool.

"Thank you, Riddle. I appreciate it." Diggory smiled warmly as he shook Harry's hands. "You're welcome, Diggory." Harry replied casually even as he smirked triumphantly internally. Oh yes, the seeds were sown. With some watering and a little effort, Diggory would soon be his.

Defense Against Dark Arts lessons. It was ironic really, that the Dark Prince himself would be attending such lessons, learning, of all things, how to defend against the Dark Arts. Harry supposed the defense classes would be informative and useful to the average student of Hogwarts, but for one steeped in the ways of the Dark Arts such as him; the lessons were boring and tedious.

Take the Unforgivables for example. The ex-auror-turned-professor Mad-Eye Moody had somehow gotten it into his head that his students would need to be exposed to the Imperius curse. He placed the curse upon his students in turns, wishing to allow them to get a feel for it, Harry supposed. There were no problems with the Ravenclaws. Most of them were breathless with excitement at the thought of feeling the Imperius firsthand – all succumbed to the Imperius. Not so with the Slytherins however. Many of them had gone through training with their respective Death Eater parents that summer, at Harry's suggestion; as part of his preparation of his attendance of Hogwarts, he had tried his best to ensure that his followers were equipped with useful skills to prevent detection of his status through them; Occulmency and resistance to Imperius being amongst those.

As a result, when Moody placed the Imperius on the Slytherins, many were able to resist the curse to a certain extent. Unfortunately, Harry did not manage to warn them to go along with the Imperius in time (in order not to draw suspicion). But at the surprised look on Moody's face, Harry could not help but snicker silently. And when upon being questioned about the phenomenon by the Ravenclaws, he reluctantly admitted that the Imperius could be resisted by people with strong will-power. To top it all, the next person on whom the curse was placed was...Harry. And now that some of the Slytherins had shown their ability in resisting the curse, Harry could not pretend to succumb to the Imperius; not if he wanted to maintain his position of strength amongst the Slytherins.

After his training in this area, it was all too easy for Harry to resist the blissful, cottony feeling that enveloped him, all too simple for Harry to resist the orders given by Mad-Eye Moody. Harry merely stood there with a raised eyebrow, as both of Moody's eyes bore into him suspiciously. At last, grudgingly and gruffly, Moody said, "Should have expected it, eh? From a champion of Durmstrang...a strong enough will to resist the Imperius. Ten points to Slytherin." Even as he said that, his narrowed eye and spinning magical eye were studying Harry intently. Certainly, Moody suspected early exposure to Dark Arts. But the ex-Auror was smart enough that he would not raise that point up in the classroom, with so many students watching. Harry had no doubt, however, that the Hogwarts Headmaster would be informed about his ability. I'd better be more careful from now on...Harry thought grimly.

Harry spent the rest of the days before Halloween consolidating his power base amongst the Slytherins and fifth-year Ravenclaws. He also made use of the information network that Daphne had put together to send out feelers in the other Houses and to spy on the other champions – it was confirmed that Fitzroy already knew of the dragons they were to face in the first task. Interesting. So. Either Maxime helped him...or he, or rather, his family, has connections in the Ministry of Magic.

After the weighing of the wands ceremony, Harry was reasonably certain that it had been Maxime who had been helping Fitzroy; the result of a few casual comments to Diggory about the lack of honour in asking for help...and the slight twitch in Maxime's face as she overheard the comments. Coupled with the way with which Harry had charmed Rita Skeeter, the journalist assigned to cover the Triwizard Tournament (and who, despite her ignorance about the fact, was on the payroll of Rabastan Lestrangle), all in all, Harry felt that it had been a rather profitable ceremony.

Even if Ollivander had stared at Harry with those creepy, dead eyes of his...Not for the first time, Harry marveled at his father's foresight. If not for the secrecy spells and the Unbreakable Vow that Voldemort had had Ollivander swear back when Harry was a young child, who knew what Ollivander could have told Dumbledore about Harry's wand...and his identity. For everyone knew that Ollivander never forgot a wand...or the person who had purchased that wand.

A few days before Halloween, Harry took a stroll around the Hogwarts lake with Daphne. It was a much calmer, more placid lake than Dumnstrang's, with none of its counterpart's glacial majesty, but with its own merry charm. A small distance away from them was the Withers twins, who were ensuring that no students approached them – since the failure of the prank at the Great Hall, Martin Potter and Ronald Weasley had taken to slouching after Harry, trying to catch him unawares. As if Harry would be so foolish as to let down his guard in the corridors! Or anywhere outside the Slytherin common room, for that matter.

Harry made sure the privacy wards were in place before he flashed his friend a smile. "So, dear Daphne, what news do you have for me?" Twirling a golden curl around her index finger, Daphne faced the lake. "Very useful news, Harrison. With Cerise's help, Korbin has

managed to find out that Fitzroy will be using the Conjunctivitis Curse, in addition to the Odour-masking Charm."

Harry nodded thoughtfully at that, even as he tapped one finger against his chin. "A very innovative tactic – adapting a make-up charm to mask his scent from the dragon, so that the dragon cannot locate him through scent. And a dragon's greatest weakness are its eyes. Targeting that...well, well, it seems that Fitzroy has shown his true colours." There was no way Fitzroy was a typical Gryffindor, not with this plan of his. A very intriguing opponent indeed, was Fitzroy.

"How about Diggory?" Harry turned to face Daphne. What he saw took his breath away. The late afternoon's sunlight glittered in Daphne's hair, giving it the appearance of spun gold. Her milky white flesh stood out in stark contrast to the black Hogwarts uniform, giving her an ethereal aura that was highlighted by her eyes. Reflecting the sunlight, it was no longer blue-grey, but a bright shade of sky blue that spoke of dreams, hope and passion.

"Cedric Diggory will be transfiguring a rock into a small animal, aiming to distract the dragon from him. This is confirmed by two separate sources: Reika Honda, who got it from Cho Chang, and Alexei, who confirmed that Cedric was studying a book on advanced Transfiguration in the library a few days after you revealed the information on dragons to him." Daphne answered, even as she raised her eyes to meet Harry's. A small mischievous smile played about her pink lips as she added, "Alexei mentioned that he questioned Cedric casually about what he was reading, and Cedric showed him the page on Transfiguring inanimate objects to animals."

Harry chuckled, getting Daphne's mirth. Trust Alexei to use such a method successfully. But then, people often underestimated quiet, introverted Alexei. And in Hogwarts, no one thought twice of a bookish Ravenclaw asking questions about books – students here were generally much more naïve than those in Durmstrang. And now that his spies had brought him his information, Harry was now certain of what method he would use for the first task.

The day of the first task dawned bright and clear. The atmosphere in the school was one of great tension and excitement. Lessons were to stop at midday, giving all the students time to get down to a dragon's enclosure – though of course, they did not yet know what

they would find there. Harry sat through Muggle Studies lesson with only half of his mind on Burbage's words – the other half being on the upcoming first task. Outwardly of course, Harry gave every indication of being a perfectly attentive student – an image he had to uphold because every single student in that class was casting covert glances at the Durmstrang champion. Who was dressed in his crimson Durmstrang school uniform, since he was, after all, representing Durmstrang today.

Soon enough however, the bell rang. Seemingly unperturbed, Harry headed to the Great Hall for lunch. Sitting at the centre position of the Slytherin table, Harry smoothly accepted wishes of 'good luck's and 'all the best's from his Slytherin friends and followers – Draco shook his hand with uncharacteristic warmth, Daphne bestowed an enchantingly sweet smile upon him and Emlen clapped him on the back heartily. In addition, a steady stream of visitors from other Houses trickled over to Harry – Durmstrang students in Hufflepuff, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, as well as a respectable number of Hogwarts Ravenclaw students.

"I'm sure you'll do well, Harrison," Padma Patil graced him with a smile that showed off her even and pearly-white teeth. Behind her, the quiet Su Li offered her shy, special half-smile as her own form of best wishes. Harry thanked them all graciously even as he finished up his light lunch.

Then, all too soon, McGonagall came rushing up. "Riddle, the champions have to come down into the grounds now...you have to get ready for your first task." Harry set his fork down onto the table and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Of course, Professor."

As Harry made to rise from the table, a large barn owl swooped down into the Great Hall, clutching in its talons a bright red envelope – Harry immediately recognized it as a Howler. The owl released the envelope directly above Harry's head. For a brief moment, Harry was tempted to blast the Howler apart in mid-air. He did not need trouble at this crucial moment Unfortunately, that would not be feasible with so many pairs of eyes upon him – Harry had to maintain a milder image at Hogwarts.

Hence Harry caught the letter between his index finger and his third finger. Then he stared. Harry recognized the handwriting on the envelope – it was written by Aleron. To open or not to open...In the

end, when it came down to it, Harry trusted that his Durmstrang second-in-command knew what he was doing.

Harry slit the envelope neatly and removed the letter. "TO OUR RESPECTED HEAD BOY AND LEADER, HARRISON," the Howler magnified Aleron's respectful, deferential tones a hundred times, "ALL OF US AT DURMSTRANG WISHES YOU ALL THE BEST FOR THE FIRST TASK. MAY YOU BE VICTORIOUS, MY PRINCE."

The students in the hall sat in silence for a few moments, then Emlen stood up and raised a fist into the air. "Victory to our prince!" He yelled, even as he tossed Harry a wink. Ah, Emlen was in on it then...Harry shook his head mentally at how his followers had managed to pull this off under his nose. The cry was soon picked up, first by all the Durmstrang students, then by the Hogwarts students who were willing to be vocal about their support to Harry, including both Slytherins and Ravenclaws. Much like the night when Harry was first selected as a Champion in fact.

At the Gryffindor table, watching in sullen silence, Ronald Weasley snarled savagely at the sight. "Acting just like a slick politician, that slimy snake." Beside him, Martin Potter nodded agreeably after a glance at Riddle. "A true git indeed." Both were still smarting over the failed prank, for the Weasley twins and even some of the other Gryffindors had teased them about it mercilessly in the aftermath. Used to the attention and admiration of his peers, Ronald Weasley did not like how Riddle's presence in the castle had shifted said attention's focus away from him and his posy of friends. Added to that the few incidences between them, the friendship between Riddle and his most hated enemy Malfoy, and the dreamy looks Riddle was getting from even the girls in Gryffindor – well, to say that Ron was both jealous of and hated Riddle would be an understatement. Martin, on the other hand, merely felt a strong dislike...but since the enemy of his friend was also his enemy...

"We'd get him Ron. We'd get him." Martin laid a hand on his friend's shoulder comfortingly, even as Harrison Riddle strode out of the Great Hall in McGonagall's wake.

Strolling into the tent near the dragon's enclosure, Harry noted that Alain Fitzroy and Cedric Diggory were already there. Fitzroy was sprawled in a corner on a low wooden bench, looking as if he hadn't

a care in the world. In contrast, Diggory was pacing up and down, appearing rather nervous. Diggory gave Harry a small, queasy smile, which Harry returned a polite nod to.

Then, Bagman came bustling up and gave them the instructions for the task, ending with a cheerful "...your task is to collect the golden egg!" Instead of paying attention to Bagman, Harry was observing Fitzroy – who seemed as composed as before. Interesting. Even if he had known of the dragons beforehand, he should at least show some signs of anxiety...unless, of course, he is extremely confident. Yes, Fitzroy would be a worthy opponent indeed. Diggory however, had started to appear slightly green in the face.

Bagman then took out a purple silk sack and offered it to Fitzroy, who pulled out a miniature model of a dragon – a Chinese Fireball, with the number 'two' around its neck. Fitzroy widened his eyes in mock-surprise. "Oh my, a dragon." The tone of surprise however, was so put-on that Harry had to raise an eyebrow in amusement. Bagman seemed oblivious as he offered the bag to Diggory, who pulled out a blueish grey Swedish Short-Snout, the number 'one' tied around its neck. Knowing what was left, Harry put his hand into the silk bag and pulled out the Hungarian Horntail, and the number 'three'. It stretched its wings as he looked down at it, and bared its minuscule fangs.

"Well, there you are!" said Bagman. "You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons, do you see? Now, I'm going to leave you, because I'm commentating. Mr. Diggory, you're first, just go out into the enclosure when you hear a whistle alright? Good luck, all!" With that, he cheerfully exited from the tent, leaving the champions in the tent alone.

Harry took a seat opposite Fitzroy, who regarded him with a bland smile that held just the slightest hint of challenge. It was not a challenge that a rival would make to his opponent, no. In Fitzroy's books, Harry, being two years younger, had probably yet to register himself as a threat, despite Harry's exemplary performance in class. But after today, you will change your mind, Fitzroy...Harry returned said smile with a small inclination of his head. It was an acknowledgement of the challenge to prove himself a worthy opponent.

Then, it was time. A whistle was blown somewhere. Cedric Diggory stopped his pacing and visibly steeled himself. "All the best, Diggory." Harry said quietly as he offered the older male an encouraging smirk. It was funny really, how an apparently sincere expression of chivalry and honour could go a long way towards generating feelings of good will in an honourable opponent...Diggory returned what he perceived as a smile with a queasy one of his own before he exited the tent.

Harry sat listening to Bagman's commentary and the crowd's responses. He was able to piece out that after Diggory Transfigured a rock on the ground into a dog, he had snuck off to try to get the egg while the dragon was preoccupied with the dog. However, the Short-Snout had changed his mind halfway though and decided to go after Diggory instead of the dog. And if the screams of the crowd were any indication, the wound that Diggory suffered seemed serious enough. It was rather a pity though, that when Bagman announced that the judges were giving scores, Harry could not see the grading...No matter, his followers would relay the information to him after the task. Such information was, after all, essential for his future plans...

Then it was Fitzroy's turn. The Beauxbaton champion tossed Harry a sharp smirk before leaving the tent with confident strides. Harry watched him leave with a contemplative look on his face. When the commentary started, Harry paid close attention to the words "Great Merlin...shot right in the eyes! Oh, she's mad now...watch out!" Accompanied by stomps, crashing noises and rabid cheers from the crowd, Harry deduced that the Conjunctivitis Curse used by Fitzroy had caused the dragon to thrash about in its agony. However, it seemed that Fitzroy's plan of masking his scent had its advantage, for Harry caught only a few near misses and what sounded like a light injury before Bagman was finally announcing, "And yes, he's got the egg!"

Harry kept his ears open while the scores were revealed; from the volume of the crowd, he deduced that Fitzroy had done better than Diggory. Before he could ponder more on the ramifications of his competitors' results however, he heard the whistle go off.

Chapter Thirty-One: Hogwarts Year Five – Dragon

Pushing himself to his feet, Harry strode towards the through the entrance of the tent. Then, he was walking past the trees, through a gap in an enclosure. The enclosure was fenced with thick planks of wood, surrounded by stands from which hundreds of faces were staring down at him. And right at the other end of the enclosure across from the gap through which Harry had entered sat the Hungarian Horntail. She was crouched low over her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her reptilian yellow eyes, so like a snake's, upon him. She was a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, which left yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground, but she was majestically, dangerously beautiful. Much like how the Killing Curse could be, deadly yet sleek and beautiful in all its green glory.

Harry allowed his lips to curve into a predatory smirk. Oh, but he would show her, her and all the others present today, just how much more dangerous he was.

Harry spotted the golden egg easily enough – it was nestled with its cement-coloured companions, safely clutched between the Horntail's front legs. With a flick of his wrist, Harry released his wand from the wand holster and pointed it at the Horntail in one smooth, fluid motion. Quick as lightning, he darted sideways in a zigzag pattern, gathered his will and snapped off four identical spells – one at each limb of the Horntail.

The bright blue-coloured spells hit the front and back legs of the dragon in sequential order. They were highly charged spells into which Harry had poured a large amount of his power. Left back leg, left front leg, right front leg, then right back leg. As soon as they impacted upon the dragon's tough, scaly flesh, frost, white and powdery, begun to cluster around the area of impact. As the frost spread around the limb, extended from first one small patch to another and eventually encircling each leg in its cold, snowy grip, it started to harden into solid, shimmering transparent, multi-faceted crystals of solid ice.

"Great Scott! He's subdued the dragon using an Ice-spell!" yelled Bagman. "Are you watching this, dragon-handlers?" The crowd shrieked and gasped at that, although Harry was certain that the majority of them did not know what an ice-spell was.

Harry smirked. Dragons were extremely difficult to subdue, due to the ancient magic that was imbued into their thick hides – none but the most powerful spells were able to penetrate that hide. The problem was, while Harry was capable of pulling off some of those spells, it would take time – time which the dragon could possibly attack him. So, Harry had to find a way to first temporarily bind the dragon...hence the beyond-NEWT level Ice-creating spell that conjured ice out of thin air to freeze its limbs in place. Normally, chains or manacles would be a logical move; unfortunately, conjured chains or manacles would not hold a dragon. Yet, there was something about ice that opposed the fiery nature of magical creatures like dragons, hence it worked better than other substances.

Harry inched closer to the dragon, warily watching as it snarled and hissed at him. Then suddenly, it opened its mouth and out of it came a great spiral stream of orange-red flames, aimed right at Harry...

Only, when the flame reached the spot Harry had been at moments before, Harry was already rolling to his feet five feet away. Thank Merlin for those practice duels with Aunt Bella...I swear I'll never complain about her making me dodge curses again.

"Golly, that was close! By Merlin's hat, our youngest champion certainly can run, can't he?" Bagman shouted cheerfully at the crowd, even as Harry gritted his teeth and tuned out the man.

Unfortunately, Harry could not repeat his Ice-creating spell at the dragon's snout. It was the source of dragon's fire, a magical flame that had roughly the same magical properties as Gubraithian fire – any attempt to freeze it would not go well for the caster. But Harry had to get closer to the dragon...yes, maybe that'd work. He started running in another zigzag pattern, putting all the agility and speed he had picked up in his private dueling lessons and field experience into a sprint in the general direction of the dragon. Two times the dragon turned its head and spurted fire aimed at him – both times, it missed.

As Harry ran, he also used all the willpower he had at his disposal, and all his Occlumency skills to compartmentalize his mind, so that he used all the leftover parts not involved in dodging to trace out runic patterns. A stroke here, a circle there...The rune for Cold. The rune for Energy. And last but not least, a rune that would widen the

conduit for his magic to flow into the spell. Then, twenty feet away from the Horntail, Harry came to a sudden halt.

Before the Horntail could react, Harry waved his wand in a complicated series of swishes and jabs – he dared not deviate from the set forms for this spell – aimed at the dragon and shouted three words, "Gelidus Gelu Tempestas" Power soared in his blood and veins, bubbling and gurgling, viscous and sweet...flowing, flowing like tall, gushing waterfall, into the spell. The resulting drain of his magical power left Harry slightly weak-headed but almost immediately, he could feel the effect. The temperature of the air in a twenty feet radius around the Horntail, plummeted drastically. Flecks of white frost could be seen on the dragon's leathery hide, even as swirling snow condensed out of the air within the radius of the spell.

"By Merlin's long white beard! What in the world is that spell?" Bagman's voice was wondering, awed. The crowd was silent for a small moment, then they broke out into chattering speculations and then... "I've just been informed by Mr. Crouch here that our youngest Champion has just used a powerful weather-changing spell to put the dragon to sleep! A powerful spell, folks..." Loud, excited cheers from the crowd drowned out Bagman's voice...after all, there were only a select handful of magically powerful and skilled wizards who were able to pull off this kind of flashy, magically-draining spell...which was exactly what Harry wanted his audience to think of his capabilities.

Taking some time to recover, Harry watched as the intense cold did its job on the dragon – which was despite being a great huge beast, was nevertheless a relative of snakes. And if there was one thing Harry knew about snakes after years of watching Nagini and Nui, it was that they were prone to prolonged sleep in cold weather. Harry did not stop to watch the dragon blink sleepily. Instead, pushing aside his weakness, he stealthily crept across the floor covered with her real eggs, making his way steadily towards the golden egg, using all the prowling skills he had picked up after a few summers of raids.

Closer and closer Harry crept...then, the Horntail gave a rumbling snore and a jet of fire shot out in its sleep. Harry had a split second to make a decision – grab the egg or dodge the flame? In the end, his stubbornness and need for control asserted itself – there was no way he would let a dragon dictate his actions, not when he was so

close to victory. Harry lunged at the egg, grabbed it, and rolled...over the bumpy, real eggs of the dragon, which thanks to their granite-solid shell, held up even under his weight. The jet of fire missed him by inches.

Walking to the centre of the enclosure, ignoring the still slumbering dragon, Harry pumped his fist into the air, with the egg tucked under his other arm, to the enthusiastic cheers of the crowd.

"Look at that!" Bagman was shouting himself hoarse. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is quickest to get his egg! Without a scratch and with one powerful spell too!"

Harry smirked widely as dragon-keepers rushed forward to subdue the Horntail...only to shiver in cold as they hit the radius of his spell. "It'd wear off in another five minutes, if you'd like to wait." Harry called out to the dragon-keepers. One of them, a stocky, muscular young man with shocking red hair – whom Harry deduced to be Charlie Weasley – smiled, shook his head and remarked wryly, "You've done in one spell what it normally takes five Stunners from dragon-handlers to do. I can hardly believe it."

Harry merely shrugged as the dragon-handlers roused the docile Horntail and led it out of the enclosure. Then, it was time to receive his scores. With the Horntail gone, Harry could now see clearly the stands draped in gold where the judges sat. Lifting his eyes, Harry saw the first judge, Maxime, raise her wand into the air. A long, silvery ribbon shot out of it, which twisted itself into a large figure eight. A product of biasness, Harry mused, since he had not actually done anything that could result in points being taken off. He had not been injured, nor had any eggs been crushed.

Next, Crouch, who was probably the polyjuiced Barty Crouch Jr., shot a number ten into the air. Harry mentally shook his head; he could just imagine Barty's chuckle of joy. Then came Dumbledore, who in line with keeping up appearances of being a fair, impartial judge of moral righteousness, gave Harry the mark he truly deserved – ten.

Bagman, on the other hand, shot a figure nine up into the air. Harry eyed the ex-Quidditch player with narrowed eyes. Since Bagman did not strike him as the overly strict type, given his commentary on the task, Harry deduced that Bagman was trying to subtly decrease the

number of points Harry received. He could not do it too obviously either, since he had all but proclaimed Harry's prowess during his commentary. So, he had taken one point off – nothing anyone would call him for, given that Maxime had given Harry only eight. I will find out the reason behind his actions...

Last of all, Karkaroff. Harry almost did not bother to watch, since the ten that came out of his wand was expected. Something that Harry had counted upon...which brought his score to a total of forty-seven. Harry allowed himself a small, contented smirk. Then, he delivered an elegantly executed half-bow in the direction of the judges before exiting from the enclosure.

Harry was confident that he had the highest score, something confirmed later by Francis, who recited the rest of the scores with suppressed excitement. "Fitzroy got forty-five. He performed the Conjunctivitis Curse. Judges were impressed but they all took points off for the scratch the dragon put on his shoulder, 'cept for Maxime, 'cos she's his Headmistress." Harry had nodded briefly, before inquiring after Diggory. Emlen had shrugged slightly, showing that he was unimpressed by the Hogwarts' Champion performance. "It was a neat bit of Transfiguration, but Diggory was careless. The Short-Snout sort of mauled his leg, and he even got a burn on his face...they gave him forty points. Bagman gave him ten, or he wouldn't even have gotten that much." Harry had narrowed his eyes – it appeared that Bagman indeed had some ulterior motive.

That Halloween was one to remember. Thrilled by the victory of one of their own, the normally decorous Slytherins all let their guard down slightly and deigned to show some of their delight. There was a decidedly festive mood at the Slytherin table at the Halloween feast, as many offered their sincere congratulations to Harry. Draco had a smirk plastered onto his face for the entire feast and even laughed at a joke that Theo cracked – Harry did not know whether to be more surprised at the fact that Theo had cracked a joke or that Draco had laughed at one. Later on, back at the Slytherin common room, Daphne had thrown a victory party for Harry, complete with flashing lights (caused by Dr Filibuster's fireworks and magical strobe lights), loud music, smuggled bottles of Firewhisky, Butterbeer and mountains of Honeydukes' cakes and sweets, which all Slytherins, Durmstrang students and a select few Ravenclaws attended. She even allowed her mask to slip slightly and was more reminiscent of her true exuberant self for most of that evening.

Caught up in the excitement of the moment and more than slightly inebriated by all the Firewhisky that he had allowed himself to imbibe, Harry cornered Daphne near the fireplace. All along, he had always thought of her as a younger sister, to be protected and coddled, but this year, somehow, his feelings for her had changed. He stared into her beautiful long-lashed bluish-grey eyes and her delicate face haloed by golden hair for long moments...A slight flush seemed to appear on her fair cheeks...so soft and smooth...Harry could not resist the sight...he allowed himself to give in to temptation and planted a kiss on her cheek. All the while, he was wondering about what her reaction would be like...To his surprise, she did not slap him or push him away, or even glare at him. Instead, the flush on her cheeks deepened and her eyes sparkled. "Harrison..." Daphne breathed as her lips parted slightly.

No, this is wrong. Gathering all his willpower, Harry pushed himself away. No, he would not do or say anything that he might regret later – that Daphne might regret later. None of them can mean anything to me...he reminded himself. I merely use and discard them...He would not hurt Daphne that way. She meant more to him than any other girl; she was no Steffi or Amelia. "'Thanks for organizing this, my dear. Come, let's rejoin the party.'" Extending a hand, he flashed his most charming smile at the girl. With a dazed look still in her eyes, Daphne acquiesced and allowed herself to be led back to the main part of the Common Room.

The next day, Harry woke up with a pounding hangover. Sweet Merlin, now I remember why I rarely drink...Groaning, he forced himself to concentrate long enough to unlock and summon a vial of hangover cure potion from his trunk. After waiting for the potion to take effect, he opened the hangings of his bed.

Only to pause, slightly surprised, by the sight of the Withers twins standing motionless by the side of his bed. While Harry had accepted their presence as his bodyguards, he had made it clear that he valued his privacy too. He had left a standing order that he did not require their service while he was in the Slytherin dungeons. Hence their current actions, in full formal bodyguard positions, made Harry raise an eyebrow.

With a small bow, Septimus answered the unspoken question quietly, "We thought it best to remain on guard given your inebriated

state, my prince." Harry narrowed his eyes. Was Septimus criticizing his actions? With a subtle brush against the older male's mind, Harry relaxed. He could perceive only concern and a sense of responsibility on Septimus' part for Harry's well-being. "Be rest assured, Septimus, I am always protected." Harry replied curtly, even though he had to admit, if only to himself, that he appreciated the twins' sense of duty.

The following weeks after the first task, Harry found the Hogwarts students generally divided into two groups – those that were resentful of the Durmstrang champion doing so well, and those that were awed by his performance. If Harry had not been a celebrity before in the social scene amongst the students, he certainly was one now. And he milked it for what it was worth, charming the female upper-years from all Houses with his polite words and charisma – the softest and easiest target by far.

Slowly and gradually, Harry planted the seeds of temptation amongst those students most receptive to the seductive nature of power. By the day after the first task, Harry had Daphne spread the news about the spell that he had used to get past the dragon; that it was one that only a powerful wizard could pull off. By presenting himself as such, he drew those who wanted a piece of that power close. Padma Patil, Anthony Goldstein, Su Li and Stephen Cornfoot were the most susceptible, after his Slytherins.

But then, Harry had Draco on hand to keep the Slytherins in line. Since the talk he had had with Draco, the latter had seemed to throw himself into his work as Harry's second-in-command with utmost abandon. And he was cautious too, to show Harry the deference and respect as was proper, acting like how a subordinate should. Unfortunately, in doing so, it felt like Harry had lost a best friend. For no longer was there the easy camaraderie and understanding that had existed for years between them. Father always said that I would soon realize I could not afford to have any friends...was he right about this, as he is with most things? Unfortunately, there did not seem to appear to be anything Harry could do about it, not if he did not wish to undo the impact he had made on Draco with his little talk. So Harry pushed the matter to the back of his mind, and focused on other things.

Such as his revenge on Fred and George Weasley, as well as Ronald Weasley and Martin Potter. While Harry had no doubt that it

was the Weasley's twins spell that had turned him into a Gryffindor monster of a mascot, Daphne had confirmed his suspicions that it was the youngest male Weasley and the Potter brat that had instigated the prank.

Sunday morning found the Ronald Weasley and Martin Potter magically tied up upside down in the Great Hall, wearing nothing but their briefs, their skin from neck down transformed into shiny green scales like those of a snake. Any student who saw them laughed uproariously, even their fellow Gryffindors – Harry had woven a small compulsion charm into the prank to discourage anyone from helping the two. By the time the staff had managed to get the two down from their position, the two boys were flushed bright red with humiliation.

"Silence!" the newly arrived James Potter cried out, glaring at the sniggering students around him, even as he went to the aid of his son. "When I find out who did this, he shall receive detention for the rest of the year!" Should I teach you how to spell 'Hypocrite', Potter? You certainly didn't jump to the defense of any other students your precious son pranked. Harry allowed a small smirk to curl his lips as he noticed James Potter glaring at him – it seemed the man had brains after all. Maybe the green scales were much too obvious...It was after all the House colour and symbol of Slytherin. No matter. He would not be able to find any evidence connecting Harry to the crime.

Albus Dumbledore clapped his hands twice cheerfully. "Now my dear Professors, does anyone has anything else to add?" Now that they had discussed the routine matters, the staff meeting was finally at the part which Albus loved the most – discussion about the students.

Tiny-statured Filius Flitwick cleared his throat twice. "Ahem..." He finally said with a huge beam on his face, in his squeaky voice. "I'm proud to say that my fifth-year Ravenclaws have shown quite an improvement in their school work!" He waved a piece of parchment excitably, showing just how pleased he was with that news. Albus waved a hand to indicate that Flitwick should continue...Ah, but he did so love hearing about the success of his students!

Flitwick then went on to outline the achievements of some of the fifth-years...Patil, Cornfoot, Li, Goldstein...they had apparently

shown steady improvement in their work in many subjects. Beaming, Albus chalked down the recent improvement to the success of his staff and relaxed into his comfortable armchair as Sprout commented on her Hufflepuffs. Then, Minerva reported on her Gryffindors, with the usual complaints about the antics of the Ronald, Martin and the Weasley twins. So sharp were her remarks that James Potter, had a slight flush on his face on behalf of his son. It wasn't until Severus reported marked improvement in the school work of his fifth-year Slytherins that warning bells rang in Albus' mind. Fifth-years...why the sudden improvement in their aptitude for school work? Now, much as Albus was reluctant to attribute their success to anything other than the hard work of his staff, he was not a blind fool. No indeed, he was not, no matter what the Daily Prophet published in its criticism of him.

Irma Pince had long ago informed Albus of a study group that met thrice a week in her library, consisting of fifth-year Slytherins and Ravenclaws, led, of all people, by one Harrison Maximus Riddle. Albus, busy with the matters related to the Triwizard preparations for the First Task, had tucked that fact neatly into one corner of his well-organized mind and paid it no mind. But now that it was brought to his attention, Albus would make sure to keep an eye on things...and the boy who seemed to be at the centre of it all. It reminded him of one other student he had taught...fifty years ago...

Therefore, when, as part of his report on the exchange students, Severus was forced to mention Harrison Riddle, Albus gave the man the full weight of his attention. "Harrison Riddle's grades are...adequate." It was said with a pronounced sneer. Since that was a rather vague adjective, Albus prompted with a twinkle in his eye. "Do explain, Severus, my boy." A scowl flitted briefly across Severus' expression and his lips thinned. "His grades rank around an Exceeds Expectations." Albus was well aware that the twinkle in his eye grew more pronounced; he knew of Severus' dislike for Riddle and, factoring the biasness in grades, concluded that the boy was at least moderately talented at that subject.

"Ah, I see. Minerva, how does the boy in Transfiguration?" Albus was somewhat surprised to see a fond expression cross Minerva's face. Oh ho! It appeared as if Harrison Riddle had charmed Minerva. Not surprising really, for a charismatic boy like Riddle. Again, Albus was forcefully reminded of the other Riddle he had taught once upon a time...

"He's rather adept at the subject, Albus. A true natural. I haven't seen such talent since James, actually. I had expected him to have some problems with NEWT level coursework, considering that he's only a fifth-year, but he's one of my top students." The usually severe Transfiguration professor confessed her amazement with a rare smile. It was high praise indeed, from Minerva. Albus waited to see if any of his staff would have anything to say to that and sure enough...

"Mr. Riddle is a prodigy!" exclaimed Filius with an excited air. "He's unquestionably the top student in my NEWT Charms class! Did everyone notice the powerful Ice-creating spell he used at the First Task?" Albus twitched slightly. Did he notice it indeed...one could say that Albus would be hard-pressed not to notice it. Together with the runic magic he displayed and the sheer amount of power that he was able to put into the spell to subdue the dragon...Albus had been consulted with for the First Task; while he had pretty much expected the Transfiguration or Conjunctivitis curse that some of the other Champions had used, Harrison Riddle's choice of magic was something he had not foreseen. Or would have foreseen, not for all the lemon sherbets in the world. Yes, Harrison Riddle was undeniably a prodigy. The problem was, the boy was a prodigy in Slytherin from Durmstrang and Albus knew firsthand how prodigies from Slytherin and Durmstrang could turn into...Memories of a dark-haired, silvered-tongue Head Boy from fifty years ago and a blonde-haired, blue-eyed youth with a roguish, charismatic smile from even further back filled his head...

With a sigh, Albus let go of the past and focused on the present. Harrison Riddle. An enigma. Albus had done a little digging into the boy's background and found that the boy was a distant relative of the Malfoy, with a father residing in Wizarding China. Rather convenient, for everyone knew how difficult it was to get any information from the Wizarding community in that country. Harrison Riddle's background hence remained more or less a mystery.

How deep had the boy delved into the Dark Arts by now? And there was no doubt that he knew the Dark Arts, for the boy was from Durmstrang Institute. Yet the boy's reaction upon meeting Fawkes was puzzling to say the least – he had not flinched or showed any sign of pain upon hearing the phoenix's song, as those who practised the Dark Arts were wont to do. Now, Albus rarely

considered himself a prejudiced person but when a school had the same reputation that Durmstrang had, one had to be wary when its mysterious genius of a Headboy seemed to be extending his influence through Hogwarts. Thus, it was with a preoccupied air that Albus returned to the staff meeting.

Only to find James, his favourite student once-upon-a-time, angrily grumbling that Harrison Riddle, while talented in his class, was a disruptive presence. Something about a duel against Ronald that caused the latter to break out into screams. "Was Mr. Riddle using a dark spell or curse perchance?" Albus inquired mildly. As James met his eyes, Albus delved subtly into the man's head using his Legilimency skill as the younger man replied after a few moments of hesitation. "No, he was using a Tickling Charm actually..." Snorts of disbeliefs could be heard around the staff table, as Albus caught flashes of the memory as James spoke. Hmm, it was a puzzle indeed – it appeared as if James was right. Was the youngest male Weasley perhaps a tad sensitive then, to allow a Tickling Charm to affect him so?

"Ah, no harm was done then, James. It was probably an overpowered Tickling Charm. Perhaps a small bit of advice should be dispensed to Mr. Riddle. Severus, you should remind Mr. Riddle of the need to restrain himself in future." With a small twinkle, Albus dismissed the matter even as he resolved to ponder further later. There was just something about the boy's actions that Albus was uneasy about...

Voldemort, Dark Lord of Wizarding Britain, sneered mentally as he contemplated the man kneeling on the rug in front of him. "You are sure of your information, Barty?" Voldemort hissed, anger lancing through his words. Utilizing his Legilimency skills, he probed at the man's brains as before him, Barty Crouch Jr. bowed his head slightly as he replied, "Yes, my lord."

Only the Keeper of the Hall of Prophecy and the subjects of the prophecy could retrieve that particular prophecy from the shelves of the Department of Mysteries – that was the information that Barty had given him. From his Legilimency, Voldemort also knew that Barty had gotten the information off a fellow Death Eater, Rookwood, who had been an Unspeakable before he had been discovered as a spy of the Dark Lord. Apparently, the man had only decided to do so recently, when it should have been the first thing he thought of when

ordered to retrieve information about the Hall of Prophecy. Admittedly, Voldemort had ordered Barty to keep that a secret; nevertheless, Barty should have found a way to retrieve the information without alerting anyone of his mission

"Your incompetence astounds me, Barty. Because of your mistake, my plans will have to change. Crucio." With a casual flick of his wand, Voldemort flung the Unforgivable Curse at Barty, letting out all his anger and frustration at the setback. Voldemort had to have the prophecy...even though the centaurs spoke of a prophecy being 'no more', Voldemort was not certain as to which prophecy they referred to – he had to get his hands on the prophecy before he could determine the truth...about whether the content of that prophecy made fifteen years ago was still valid. Harry was now his precious son and heir, true, but Voldemort was still wary; he needed to know for certain what that prophecy said before he could have peace of mind.

But all that could wait a few moments more. Currently, Voldemort had the punishment of his Death Eater to attend to...To his credit, Barty did not scream or collapse to the ground, as many Death Eaters were wont to do, although he did let out a huge gasp of pain and many small whimpers. Voldemort's lips curled as he increased the power behind his Cruciatus...he wanted to hear Barty screaming; it was the least the man could do for causing him such an inconvenience.

Mid-Novemeber. Throwing a glance at the golden egg nested at his bedside table, Harry smirked. Other champions should be pondering upon the clue for the second task now, if they had not puzzled it out already. Within seconds of opening the egg for the first time, Harry had known that the noise was a message – after all, what was the point of giving the champions a screaming egg if the clue was not in the noise it made? From there, it had been simple to deduce that the noise might be a different language – Harry had then cast a high-level Translation spell at the egg. When the spell had not revealed any result however, Harry knew he had found his answer – the language spoken was not one meant to be heard on land. Thereafter, it had been the work of an hour to go through a few experiments to determine what type of language it was...and bingo, he found out that it was in Mermish.

After listening to the horrible poem, Harry had rolled his eyes and deduced most of the details. One, the second task was going to take place in the lake at Hogwarts, since there wasn't any other large body of water near the place, and two, he had to retrieve a hostage from the lake whilst dodging any possible obstacles. While the second was mere guesswork, knowing that Albus-too-many-names-Dumbledore had been involved in the planning process of the Triwizard Tournament, he thought it was quite logical – the man was known for his bleeding heart... what he thought the champions would 'sorely miss' would likely be their 'loved ones'...Harry shuddered. He was going to keep this thought to himself or no doubt he'd be facing another round of lectures from his father on the weakness of becoming attached...Harry had then penned a quick letter to Barty to ask for confirmation of his theory, which he had received rather quickly. Now, the only thing he had left was to figure out whom Dumbledore thought he would 'sorely miss' and which of the many spells and curses in his admittedly large repertoire he should utilize. And he had a couple of months to work things out...

With a start, Harry realized that he had been at Hogwarts for two months and counting. Somehow, the time that he spent at Hogwarts was much more enjoyable than he had expected. Compared to Durmstrang, the socio-political scene at Hogwarts was more of a challenge for Harry to navigate, what with the four Houses and the exchange students. Before he knew it, Harry had set plans upon plans in motion in order to deal with the situation. Luckily for Harry, he had very competent and capable subordinates...

Unfortunately, there was one subordinate whom he refused to have as a mere subordinate –proud and aristocratic Draco Malfoy. He had been putting it off for ages, but he could see that he would have to have a talk with Draco – the blonde had been somewhat withdrawn and reticent around Harry since the incident, but only in small ways. He spoke more formally, acted slightly more deferent and smirked a whole lot less. Not that it had affected his performance of his duties, no, Draco had, as always, been cunning, subtle and all-around exemplary in that regard. But Harry had to admit, if only to himself, that he cared for Draco. As a person, not only as what he could bring to Harry's plans. Which is the reason why Father always berates me about forming attachments...oh, the trouble they cause...But Draco was his best friend, and hence worth it to Harry.

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